



AIMÉE CARTER

GODDESS
OF THE
UNDERWORLD



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This story can be read at any time, but was originally written after *Goddess Interrupted* and before *The Goddess Inheritance*.

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- ***The Goddess Hunt (Novella)***
- ***Goddess Interrupted***
- ***The Goddess Queen (Novella)***
- ***The Lovestruck Goddess (Novella)***
- ***Goddess of the Underworld (Novella)***
- ***God of Thieves (Novella)***
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“A fresh take on the Greek myths adds sparkle to this romantic fable.”

—Cassandra Clare on *The Goddess Test*

GODDESS OF THE UNDERWORLD

AIMÉE CARTER



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Part One

For the first sixteen years of my life, Mother told me my wedding day would be one of the happiest in my eternal existence. That the birds would sing, the air would smell like flowers and the sun would shine. Every last detail would be perfect.

Like an idiot, I'd believed her.

The sun didn't shine in hell, and unless bats counted, there weren't any birds in the endless Underworld palace, either. To make things worse, the infinite rock surrounding the cavern weighed down on me, growing heavier with every passing second. I was trapped, literally and figuratively. And I had no idea how to dig myself out of this one.

Mother did manage to keep her word about the flowers, though. As I paced from one end of the chamber to the other, eleven steps in each direction, I had to zigzag my way around the endless bunches of wildflowers that covered every available surface. The perfume was strong enough to knock out Cerberus, but at least it didn't smell like death.

"Persephone?" Mother poked her head into the room. Given the way she glowed, I would've guessed this was her wedding, not mine. "It's time. How are you feeling?"

She knew exactly how I felt about all of this. She didn't want the truth—she wanted false affirmation that I was as happy as she was. "I don't want to do this," I said. No use holding back now.

"Sweetheart," said Mother in a tone she must have thought was understanding, but was really the same one she'd used to convince me to do this in the first place. She stepped inside the chamber and closed the door behind her. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that I don't want to marry Hades." Searching for a place to sit, I spotted a chair in the flowered jungle, but a bouquet of purple blossoms already claimed it. I huffed and sank to the floor instead. "You told me the Underworld wasn't so bad."

"It isn't." She knelt beside me. "You've only seen the palace. There's an entire world out there—"

“It feels like a cage. It’s heavy and unnatural and—I want to stay in Olympus with *you*.” My voice hitched, and I blinked rapidly. Breaking into tears would’ve been a surefire way to make Mother believe I was simply too emotional to think clearly. I’d never thought more clearly in my life, though.

Mother wrapped her arms around me, and for a moment I allowed myself to lean against her. “You’ve known this was coming for a long time, my darling. I would never allow this if I wasn’t absolutely certain you would love him.”

“But I don’t.” Didn’t she understand that?

“You will, in time.”

“What if I never do?”

“Persephone, look at me.” She tilted my head upward, and my eyes met hers. “You will. Trust me.” Her confidence should’ve sparked the same in me, but I was empty. “I’ll come visit you all the time. This is the beginning of the rest of your life, not the end.”

She was wrong—it was the end of everything that mattered. The end of days picking flowers and soaking in the sunlight, the end of nights sitting in her lap as she told me stories. A deep ache filled me, and I swallowed hard. No crying. Not today.

“I am so proud to call you my daughter,” she murmured.

“Eventually you will understand why I asked this of you. In time, you will be happier here with Hades than you could ever be with me in Olympus.”

Mother had never been so wrong so many times in a row before. I couldn’t be happy, not in this underground cavern. Not without the sun. Not without her.

“Hades loves you already, my darling. He is quiet, and he doesn’t love out loud like you may be used to, but that doesn’t make his love any less strong. You’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

Reluctantly I nodded. I’d seen it, that piercing stare when he thought I wouldn’t notice. The way his eyes seemed to follow me as I moved across the room. Not in a predatory way, but as if he was concerned. As if he cared. Maybe he secretly wasn’t crazy about this whole thing, either.

“Do you trust me not to hurt you?” she murmured. “Do you trust me to want only the best for you?”

I loved her. I trusted her. And her pride filled me in a way I was certain Hades's so-called love never could. But maybe she was right—maybe in time I would love him. Maybe if this wasn't an arranged marriage, I would've loved him anyway. But she and my father had stolen that chance from me.

"You'll find happiness here," she said. "You'll find your purpose, and I will never be far. We all have roles in our lives, Persephone—roles we may not initially enjoy, but roles we soon realize are necessary. You were born to do this, my darling, and Hades loves you. Trust me when I say that. I love you too much to ever allow anyone to hurt you, including myself."

I swallowed. She did love me. Out of everything in the world, that was the one thing I knew to be completely, unequivocally true. And because of that, I let her help me up, my legs unsteady beneath me.

"My beautiful girl. The love of my life." She plucked a purple blossom from the bouquet in the chair and secured it in my curls. Strawberry-blond now, as autumn set in. "You are perfect."

I ached to believe her, but as she led me into an antechamber, a melody from the strings of Apollo's lute filtered through the air. And instead of reminding me of harmony and love, the notes were mournful to my ear, fitting perfectly with the bleakness of this realm.

This wasn't my wedding. It was my funeral.

She looped her arm in mine, and a pair of double doors opened, revealing the throne room of the Underworld. With its obsidian pillars and curtains of black-and-gold that hung from high windows, it was nothing like the throne room of Olympus. Nothing like my home.

Mother stayed with me until we reached the front of the throne room, where Hades stood between a pair of diamond thrones. His, a black one I'd seen countless times during council meetings, and mine. White diamond—a present from Hades, welcoming me to the Underworld. And from the council, welcoming me as their equal.

But I would never be their equal, and they knew it as well as I did. An equal would've been allowed to make her own decisions, not pawned off in an arranged marriage at sixteen. If they thought I would lie down and take it, they were dead wrong.

"I love you," whispered Mother. I stayed silent. Taking my hand, she placed it in Hades's, his skin warmer than I expected. His silver

eyes met mine, and a shiver ran down my spine.
I was his for eternity now.

* * *

I couldn't hide behind the wedding forever. The other members of the council seemed to enjoy themselves, dancing and drinking well into the night. Hera remained close, eyeing me every so often, but she didn't speak to me. Could she sense the mountain of anxiety forming in my chest? Could she see my fear growing with every moment I remained inside my stone cage? More than the rest of us, she cared about marriages being successful. Could she tell how much I hated mine already? Did she regret giving her blessing?

I wished she hadn't. Maybe then my parents would've never forced me into this. I was hours into my marriage, and already I felt weighed down by rock and invisible chains. Not exactly an auspicious start.

At last only Hades, me and Mother remained, and after Hades excused himself for his chambers—our chambers now—she pulled me into a tight hug. “He loves you,” she murmured. “I know it may not feel like it, but he would have never married you if he didn't.”

I buried my face in her shoulder. It wasn't his love I was concerned about. It was mine. For as long as I'd been aware of what marriage was, I'd known I was promised to Hades, and I'd been absolutely certain I would love him by now. Enough to be content, at least, if not thrilled. And while I tried to grab on to the single wisp of love I may or may not have felt for him, it was beyond my reach.

But it would come closer the more time I spent with him, the more smiles and words and touches we shared. It had to. Aphrodite hadn't chosen her husband either, after all, and now she'd spent the entire day cuddling up to him. And Hera, who *had* chosen hers, was completely miserable.

So maybe Mother was right. Maybe love was in that room, waiting for me, and all I had to do was go in there and get it.

“You'll come visit me?” I said. “Or I could come visit you.”

“Both,” she said, kissing my cheek. “All the time, as much as you want. Just make sure you don't neglect your duties down here,

darling. And remember—happiness is a choice, but so is misery. Choose wisely.”

She let me go, and I reluctantly dropped my arms. Giving me a reassuring smile, she turned to go, but before she reached the door, I blurted, “It’ll be okay, right?”

Mother looked over her shoulder. “It already is. Go to your husband, Persephone. Give him a chance to make you happy.”

She left, the door closing behind her, and I exhaled. Hades was really my husband. My king. I was married now, and things would never go back to the way they’d been. This was my life now.

Time to face it.

The door into Hades’s chambers opened easily. I stepped inside, expecting it to be dark and dank, like the rest of the Underworld, but instead the large room was lit with dozens of floating candles. They cast a soft glow on the plush bed, where Hades sat waiting for me, and a fist wrapped around my guts. This was it.

“Persephone.” He rose and offered me his hand, his silver eyes searching mine. I didn’t know what else to do, so I threaded my fingers through his. We were friends, sort of. Growing up knowing who I was going to marry took the choice out of it, sure, but it’d also given me a lifetime of getting to study him. Mother was right—he was a good man. He did love me. And being here with him wasn’t the worst thing I’d ever experienced.

I stared at him for the space of several heartbeats, and at last I whispered, “I’m sorry, I’m not—I’m not really sure what to say.”

He smiled, crinkles appearing around his eyes. “Then allow me to break the silence by saying how lovely you look tonight. You always do, of course.” He touched one of my curls. They would change with the seasons, auburn in the coming months before turning black for the winter solstice, and then as spring came, they would lighten to brown. Finally, in the summer, I would be blond. It’d never served a purpose before, but now I would never lose track of the seasons in the Underworld.

I sank onto the edge of the bed. It was strange being alone with him—despite Mother’s insistence that he and I get to know each other, she’d always been present. He felt older somehow, and power

radiated effortlessly from him. As he sat down beside me, however, he gently cupped my hand in both of his.

“You’re nervous,” he said. It wasn’t a question, and he didn’t wait for me to answer. “I am, too.”

I scoffed. “You’re King of the Underworld. What do you possibly have to be nervous about?”

He hesitated, brushing his thumb against my knuckles. The gesture was almost intimate in its simplicity, and a shiver ran through me. “I am nervous that I cannot give you everything you deserve.”

“What do you mean?”

He squeezed my hands. “You could do so many things with your existence, yet you are down here with me. I cannot tell you what that means to me. No one...” He paused, and the cords in his neck stood out. “No one has chosen me before, not because of who I am. Not for pure reasons. That you are willing to try is everything I have never had before.”

Warmth filled me, and I inched closer to him. It wasn’t so hard to see his life through his eyes, all those eons of loneliness. “I’m going to try,” I promised. “I want—I want to be with you.”

I wasn’t sure I did, really, but I also wasn’t sure I didn’t. I would’ve liked the choice, but that had always been out of my control. This—the here and now, how good we were together, that was at least half in my control. And knowing Hades was willing to try to make this work made all the difference.

“I know that this marriage will take time to settle for both of us, but we will grow together. We will learn together,” he said, raising my hand to his lips.

Yes, we would. Underneath his piercing gaze, I relaxed. It would be all right. Mother knew what she was doing, and she would’ve never married me off to Hades if she wasn’t absolutely sure we would work. But even as I thought it, I grew painfully aware of the stone surrounding me. No matter how I felt about it, I was still trapped down here. Fooling myself into being happy wouldn’t change that. It wouldn’t give me my choice and freedom back.

I straightened and took a deep breath. Yes, it would. Happiness was a choice, exactly as Mother had said. And this was a choice I could make.

I didn't ask. I didn't hesitate. Instead I leaned in and kissed him full on the mouth, the kind of kiss I'd never given anyone before. The kind of kiss Aphrodite gave to Hephaestus. The kind of kiss I wanted Hades to give to me.

It was warm and wet and not what I expected, not at all. It didn't sizzle or sparkle or make me love him. It didn't open up a whole new world of possibilities. It was just that—lips against lips, a soft mouth against my own. And to make matters worse, Hades didn't kiss me back.

I opened my eyes. His were open as well, cloudy with questions, but I didn't give him the chance to speak. I knew what he would say if I did—was I sure I wanted to do this now? Did I want to wait until we knew each other better?

But I wanted that love. I *needed* that love to make the rock melt away, to make everything not so bad. And if I could make myself love him as much as he loved me...maybe it would all be okay. Maybe this wouldn't be a prison.

So I kept kissing him. My hands fumbled down his front, pushing away his clothes and brushing against his warm skin. I could do this. I *would* do this, and once we were together in the most intimate way possible, it would all click. We would be happy, and it wouldn't be an illusion. It would be my choice.

As I drew him down onto the bed, however, he broke away. "Persephone—"

"Don't," I said. "Please."

His Adam's apple bobbed, but he fell silent. I kissed him again, pulling him as close to me as possible. I'd never had someone pressed against me like this before, and his body was solid, weightier than I'd expected. Not that I'd expected much, but it still felt foreign.

I didn't let myself stop. Soon enough we were both completely undressed, and as he settled over me, I pushed away every last shred of fear that haunted me. We were doing this together, and no matter how exposed and terrified I was, lying there in his bed, I would not back down.

One night of swallowing my fears, one night of being with him like this, and that wisp of love would turn into a howling storm. I just

needed to get through tonight.

“Do it,” I whispered, and when he opened his mouth again, undoubtedly to protest, I silenced him with a burning kiss.

Everything would be fine. Better than fine.

It had to be.

* * *

It wasn't fine. It wasn't even close to fine.

Our bodies didn't fit. Maybe it was my virginity, or maybe he was unnaturally blessed, but whatever it was, it was hot, sticky, uncomfortable, awkward, everything it wasn't supposed to be. And had I not been immortal, I was sure it would've been one of the most painful experiences of my life.

To make matters worse, he didn't seem like he knew what he was doing, either, and we both fumbled through it. It might've been intimate, but it wasn't sexy or loving. It was all physical, nothing emotional, and by the time it was over, I was struggling to hold back tears.

Hades rolled off me, his chest heaving. As his eyes searched mine, his brow furrowed, and he brushed his fingers against my cheek. “I'm sorry.”

I shook my head, too close to breaking down to speak. It wasn't his fault. I'd been the one to pressure him into this, to force us both before we were ready. But the part of me drowning in anger and disappointment blamed him. He could've done what I hadn't had the courage to do and walked away. He could've said no to my father when he'd suggested this marriage to begin with.

“It will get better,” he whispered. “I love you.”

Silence surrounded us, and I knew without asking that he was waiting for me to say it back. To offer him one small affirmation that this wasn't a complete disaster. But it was, and a tear slid down my face, too fast for me to catch it.

In the glow of the candlelight, Hades's expression crumbled. He knew what my silence meant, and for a moment, he seemed to fold into himself. His shoulders hunched and his head bowed, and his

fingers dug into the sheets. I didn't offer him any comfort. I couldn't. I'd only be lying to us both.

At last Hades came to life and pulled a silk blanket up to cover me. He didn't try to touch me, though he did watch me for a long moment. I turned away. I didn't want his guilt as well as mine.

Eventually the candles burned out, or maybe Hades extinguished them. Either way, in the darkness, the rock weighed down even heavier around me, and I could barely breathe.

I couldn't do this. I couldn't be here with a man I didn't love. Married or not, his queen or not, I was a person, not an object, and my parents had had no right to do this to me in the first place. But here we were, both of us victims, both of us painfully aware of the wall between us now. It hadn't been there before the wedding, but now, because of me, because of my parents...

I didn't sleep, and judging from Hades's breathing, neither did he. At last, when it was time to get up—how Hades could tell without the sun, I had no idea—I waited until he dressed and disappeared before I got out of bed and bathed. I had two options: I could stick around and accept my fate, or I could fight for my freedom.

No contest.

As soon as I finished washing off any last trace of the night before, I hurried out of the bedroom, nearly crashing headfirst into Hades in the hall. Though he carried a tray, he managed to sidestep me without dropping anything. For a long moment, we stared at each other.

"Where..." He paused and clutched the tray, loaded with my favorite fruits, breads and cheeses. He was bringing me breakfast in bed. "Where are you going?"

Another wave of guilt washed over me. Even after last night, he was still trying to make me happy. "I—I need to see Mother," I said, my voice hitching. "Can I...?"

"Of course." He set the tray down on an end table and reached for me, though he pulled away at the last second. "I'll take you up to Olympus."

I followed him through the hallway to the private entrance, and together we walked down the cavern path that led to the portal between realms. Seeing the rock around me only made the weight

on my chest worse, and by the time we reached the crystal circle in the ground, I could barely see straight.

“Are you all right?” said Hades, touching my elbow. Though it wasn’t much, it was enough to remind me of the night before, and I shuddered. He immediately dropped his hand.

“I’m sorry, I just—I need to—I need to go to Olympus. Can you show me how?” Technically, before my wedding and coronation, I’d been unable to, but now, as Queen of the Underworld, I had that power.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Of course. I have to touch you to get you there. Is that all right?”

I nodded, and he set his hand on my back. It was a familiar touch, the kind only two people who knew each other well could share, and his skin burned against mine.

Why was it this bad? Sure, the night before hadn’t been at all what I’d been raised to expect from watching Aphrodite and her lovers, but plenty of people had gone through worse. So why did the very thought of him make me sick to my stomach?

“Like this,” he said quietly, and I felt a rush of power emanate from him, dark and rich and completely repugnant. But there was no escaping him as we raced upward through the rock, and by the time we burst into the open sky, I was nauseous. From the journey, from the Underworld, from Hades’s touch or ancient power, I didn’t know, but all I wanted was to go home.

At last we landed in the middle of Olympus, and I broke away from him and ran as fast as I could. Through the throne room, into the hallway, toward Mother’s room, everything around me a blur. The golden sunshine that reflected off every inch of Olympus seemed to fill me from the inside out, and by the time I burst into her chambers, I was glowing. “Mother!”

“Persephone?” She stood and opened her arms, and I melted into them. “I didn’t expect to see you so soon. Is Hades with you?”

I nodded, and something about hearing her voice and feeling her familiar presence made that dam inside me snap. I broke into rough sobs, clutching her as hard as I could. I wouldn’t let her go again, not for anything.

Somehow Mother managed to guide me to her bed, and together we sank down. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” She tried to pull away, but I held on. “Surely it wasn’t that bad.”

But it was. I couldn’t explain it to her—I couldn’t even explain it to myself—but in that moment, I would’ve rather faded for eternity than go back to the Underworld with Hades. I didn’t belong there. We didn’t belong together, and it was all a mistake—a stupid mistake that Mother could fix.

“Please,” I gasped between sobs. “Don’t make me go back there.”

Her arms tightened around me. “What happened? Darling, if you don’t tell me, I can’t help you.”

I opened my mouth to try to find the words, but before I could say a single one—

“Persephone?”

I looked up, my lower lip trembling. “Father?”

Zeus stepped into the room, his brow knit and mouth turned downward. Father or not, I’d never spent much time with him beyond what little bonding assuaged his guilt. But I would’ve taken his awkward hugs and nasty temper a thousand times over before I went back to Hades.

“Persephone, your husband is waiting for you in the throne room,” he admonished. “He’s quite worried.”

I sniffed, refusing to lessen my grip on Mother. “I can’t go back there. I can’t *breathe*.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re a goddess. You don’t need to breathe,” said Zeus. “Now, explain to me what this tantrum of yours is all about.”

“Zeus,” said Mother in a warning tone, but he didn’t budge. He stared at me, his blue eyes stormy and his arms crossed over his broad chest. I’d never been afraid of him before, but tension crackled in the air sure as lightning. One wrong word, and daughter or not, he’d treat me like a traitor.

“I can’t—” I hiccupped. “The rock’s too heavy, and—Hades, we—” My face grew hot. “Please don’t make me go back.”

“You have no choice in the matter,” said Zeus. “You are Queen of the Underworld now, and that is not a crown you can give up.”

"I don't care, just—please. I'll do anything," I begged. "I can't go back."

Mother sighed. "You've been there all of one night. Things will get easier. I know it's a change from Olympus—"

"Have you ever spent the night down there?" I said, and she hesitated.

"No, but—"

"I *can't*, Mother. *Please*."

She frowned and shared a look with Zeus. "Your father's right. You're Queen, and like it or not, that is not a role you can relinquish. Regardless of your marriage, Hades needs your help ruling, and you've already made a commitment. You cannot back out of it no matter how different it is from your expectations."

My entire body felt as if it had turned to stone. I'd expected opposition from Zeus, of course. He was never agreeable about anything. But my own mother...

"You don't understand." I pulled away and stood on trembling legs. "It's not natural down there. It's—cold and dark and twisted, and I can't *breathe*—"

"Again with the breathing," said Zeus, and Mother shushed him.

"—and I don't love him, Mother. I can't spend my life down there."

"Love?" Her confused expression morphed into a sympathetic one, and humiliation coursed through me. I didn't want her pity. I wanted her understanding. "Persephone, love has very little to do with it. Hades loves you, of course, but your love for him won't come immediately. You must give it time."

"But how can I love something completely unlovable?" My voice broke, and I wiped my cheeks angrily.

"You can, and eventually you will. In many ways, Hades is the most loving of us all," said Mother. "Do not be fooled by his dark kingdom. There is beauty in it, and despite a difficult night, things will get easier. Happiness is a choice—"

"And I choose not to be." The words came out as a broken sob. "You're going to do this to me? You're going to damn your only daughter to a life down there with him?"

Mother faltered. "Sweetheart, please. Tell me what brought this on."

But I couldn't. I didn't know what specific thing was behind the wall of hatred and anger inside me. I didn't know what made me want to run, but that didn't make it any less real. "He just—" I shook my head. "It isn't right."

"Take it one step at a time," said Mother in what she must've meant to be a soothing voice, but it made me shudder. "If you didn't enjoy consummating your marriage, that's natural. The first time is almost never—"

"It isn't *about* that."

"Then what is it about?" She reached for me, but I stepped back. My entire body trembled so badly that I had to struggle to stay upright. It was as if I was fighting an invisible force just by being in the room, and I didn't know how to stop it.

"I just—I don't belong there. I don't know how else to explain it."

Mother and Zeus exchanged another look, and Zeus cleared his throat. "You will return to the Underworld with Hades, and you will obey him as you would obey me. He is your husband now, and you will not dishonor me by evading your duties. Do you understand?"

My eyes watered until I couldn't make out his features. But I knew that voice—it was the voice of a king, the one he used when we had absolutely no choice. The voice he'd used to tell me I'd be marrying Hades on my sixteenth birthday no matter how I felt about it.

I couldn't respond. Every time I opened my mouth, that wall of hatred and resentment was there, and finally I dashed past him and fled the room. I couldn't do this no matter how often he threatened me, and the fact that he and Mother refused to so much as consider my feelings—it wasn't fair. I needed to get away from that unyielding revulsion. I needed to get away from my life.

As I ran down the hallway, I nearly barreled headfirst into Hera. Had she been there the entire time? Our eyes locked, and she opened her mouth to say something, but I regained my footing and rushed past her. I didn't care if she'd overheard. I didn't care if she empathized with being trapped in a loveless marriage. There was nothing she could possibly say or do to change my parents' minds, and I didn't need pity. I needed an escape.

At last I made it to the throne room. A few feet from the portal, Hades waited with Hermes, who wore a bewildered expression. As I

stumbled onto the crystal circle, Hades moved to join me, but Hermes darted in front of him, blocking his way. Whatever his reason was, I didn't have time to find out. I dropped from Olympus, the wind rushing through my hair and whipping it across my face.

Freedom. And free-falling, apparently. I'd never used a portal by myself, and I opened my mouth in a silent scream. So maybe not waiting for Hades hadn't been the best idea, but I would've rather plummeted to earth than let him join me.

I expected a crash landing, the sort that would leave an indentation in the ground for curious mortals to ponder, but as my feet touched the earth, I stopped. No hard landing. No real impact. I didn't even leave footprints on the grass.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I ran my fingers through my tangled hair and looked around. I stood in a meadow full of purple flowers that danced in the breeze, and it was warm despite the late hour of wherever it was I'd landed. A beautiful summer evening.

Why couldn't Hades live on the surface? Why did he have to be near his subjects at all times? Zeus certainly wasn't. I sat down heavily in the middle of the field, passing my hand through the tall grass. This was my home, surrounded by warmth and nature and life. Not encased in stone.

The wind picked up for a moment, and something rustled behind me. Hades, no doubt, coming to reclaim me and drag me back to that dark place. I refused to turn around. He couldn't have me, not anymore.

"Persephone?"

I exhaled. Not Hades. "Hermes? What are you doing here?"

"You're upset," he said as he moved to sit in front of me. We'd grown up together, babies compared to the rest of the council, and seeing him now made me more homesick than ever. "Did Hades hurt you?"

He was the first person to acknowledge that maybe this wasn't my fault, and my heart swelled in gratitude. "N-no." I hiccupped. "I just—I can't go back."

He took my hands, his fingers smooth and cool. That small gesture of affection was enough to make me break down all over again, and I rested my head on his shoulder as I cried. I hated

feeling like this—I hated not having the courage to give Hades a chance. But it wasn't him. It was the feeling of being suffocated, smothered, burned out before I'd had the chance to live. Why hadn't I questioned my parents earlier? Why hadn't I demanded a chance to get to know Hades and the Underworld better? Why hadn't they given me a choice?

Because they'd known what I would say if they had. They must have. Mother knew me better than I knew myself, and my trust in her—the same trust that had made me take the plunge into this marriage—was too absolute for me to question it before. Even now I second-guessed myself. Was I being hasty? Should I give Hades a chance? Did I even have a choice?

No, and that only made me cry harder. I didn't have a choice. Whether I liked it or not, I would have to return to the Underworld. Unless—

My eyes flew open, and I sat up. Hermes straightened as well, but I spoke before he could utter a word. "Run away with me."

His lips formed a perfect circle. "What?"

"You heard me. Run away with me. We can go someplace they'll never find us, like Aphrodite and Ares did, and—and we can be *happy*."

"Wait." He pulled away from me. "You mean you want—you and me—"

I shivered. After last night, I never wanted to have that sort of relationship with anyone ever again. "No, I mean—as friends. Brother and sister, whatever we are." We weren't, technically, since Zeus had taken different forms to father us and we had different mothers. But I needed someone else to love me. I didn't care what kind of love it was, as long as it meant I could get away from Hades. "Please."

Hermes hesitated, and I could see the wheels turning in his head. Hope blossomed inside my chest, pushing aside the coldness and despair. He was considering it. He was really considering it.

"Persephone..." He took my hands in his again. "You know I want nothing more than to see you happy, but Zeus already forbade anyone from interfering with your marriage. If we left, Zeus and

Hades would both hunt us down, and I'd get a lightning bolt to the skull for sure."

My heart sank, and that delicate bubble of hope deflated. "He really ordered everyone not to help me?"

Hermes nodded. "I'm sorry. But maybe you and Hades could talk it out. You could just be his queen and not his wife, right? He needs you to help him rule, not warm his bed."

I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting another wave of tears. I was never getting out of this. Not now, not in a thousand years, not ever. Not as long as Zeus treated me like property and Hades went along with him. "He would never agree," I whispered.

"So don't give him a choice." Hermes tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, his touch so gentle that I shifted closer. "Just tell him. You're stronger than you think you are, Persephone. Never question that. You can do whatever you set your mind to, circumstances be damned."

"I wish—" My voice broke, and I swallowed thickly. "I wish I were like Aphrodite. I wish I had the strength to do what she did."

"Maybe someday you will," he said. "You just need to find the right person is all. If Hades isn't it, then there's nothing wrong with that. This doesn't have to be forever if you don't want it to be."

I snorted despite myself. "Everything in our family is forever."

"Only the good things," he said. "We usually find a way to fix the bad ones."

"Don't see how anyone would agree to let me off the hook if I don't even try."

"Then try. Do whatever you have to do to prove to yourself and the rest of the council that it isn't a good fit."

"Hades will never let me go," I mumbled. "Not now, not in a hundred years, not ever. He loves me."

"If he really loves you, then once he understands how miserable you are, he will let you go," said Hermes. "Just because he's a good guy doesn't mean he's a good guy for you."

I shook my head. "You can say all the pretty things you want, but that won't change anything."

"You're right," he said. "The only one who can change any of this is you. You just have to try."

“But I already did.”

“I know. They should’ve listened.” He pulled me into a hug. The weight of his arms around my shoulders was a comfort, and I managed to relax against him. At least I had someone on my side.

A moment later, the breeze picked up again, and I sensed a second presence in the meadow. The sun dipped beneath the horizon, and Hermes stiffened. I didn’t need to turn around to know who it was.

“Please,” I whispered one last desperate time. “I’ll do anything.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” Hermes’s voice was low and his words rushed. “Listen—I’ll visit you all the time, I promise. You won’t be alone. Just do me a favor and give yourself a chance, all right? Do whatever you have to do to be happy, even if that means upsetting the council. They’ve already had their say. Now it’s your turn.”

I pressed my lips together. Being that kind of selfish went against everything Mother had taught me. Be there for others; place their happiness above my own; be content with my life; don’t be greedy or envious or unkind; appreciate the warmth and love around me, and don’t covet what I don’t have.

But how could I appreciate what wasn’t there? Hades may have loved me, but what did that mean if I couldn’t feel it? He could love me more than anyone loved anyone else in the entire world, and it still wouldn’t help if I didn’t love him back. Maybe in time I would adjust and grow to love him, but right now, all I could think about was the rock weighing down on me and the feeling of Hades’s body over mine. And I didn’t have the patience to wait.

“Promise me, Persephone,” whispered Hermes, and at last I nodded.

“I promise.”

Behind me, something—rather, someone—cast a shadow over me with what little daylight remained, and I shivered. “Hades.”

“I am sorry to interrupt,” he said quietly, and there was something about the way he said it that made me think he really was. “If I could speak with you alone, Persephone?”

Hermes nodded, and before I could protest, he untangled himself from me and stood. “I’ll see you around,” he said to me, and at least I knew he wasn’t just saying that. At sixteen, he was training for his

role on the council, as I was, and part of that included guiding the dead down to the Underworld. Chances were good I'd see him often, and that one reminder was enough for me to breathe easier. It wouldn't be just me and Hades down there. I had to remember that.

Once Hermes walked off into the woods, Hades knelt beside me. His long, dark hair, usually so impeccable, was mussed, and his fingers dug into his thighs. "I owe you an apology."

Not this again. "You don't owe me anything," I mumbled, staring down at a lopsided blossom. "I'm sorry I ran up here."

"Do not be," he said. Neither of us could look at the other. "What happened last night...I promise you it will not happen again, not unless we are both willing and prepared."

His words twisted something in my gut. I'd been willing last night. Nervous, but willing, and determined to get it over with. Had he not been? Had I taken that from him? Was that part of the reason why things were so terrible between us?

"I don't..." The words stuck in my throat, and I struggled to swallow them.

Just tell him.

Hermes's voice echoed through my mind, gentle but unyielding, and finally I opened my mouth and blurted, "I want a separate bedroom."

Hades blinked, clearly startled. "Is there something wrong with—"

"Yes," I said before I lost my nerve. "I'm scared of you. I'm scared of this. And if I can't stay up here, then I don't want to stay with you down there."

He stared at me, speechless. For the better part of a minute, his eyes searched mine, and I refused to look away. I couldn't back down no matter how much it hurt him. Maybe this was a step in the wrong direction, maybe this was exactly what we didn't need, but I needed a space of my own. If I stayed with him, I would crumble. And I rather thought he would, too.

"All right," he said, his voice cracking. "If that is what you want..."

"It is," I said. "I'm your queen, and I'll rule at your side as much as you need me to. But if you want me at my best, then I can't be your wife. Not yet. Not until things are better."

For the briefest of moments, his expression shifted into pain and self-loathing, and guilt rushed through me as I nearly took it back. I could try. I had it in me. But even as I opened my mouth, that wall reared up inside me again, forming a barrier between us so strong that no amount of guilt could break it. I couldn't be his wife. Not now. Not if I wanted to have any chance of surviving this.

"Someday they will be," I said. "We can work toward it. Just—give me a chance to adjust, okay? And in the meantime, we'll be friends."

His expression relaxed enough to let me know I'd said something right. "Very well. We are friends."

Hades stood, offering me his hand, and I reluctantly accepted. Not because I needed his help, but because he needed some small amount of hope. I couldn't crush him completely.

"I want you to be happy," he said as the warm breeze danced around us. "From the moment your mother introduced us, my joy was tied with yours, and I promise you that despite my mistakes, everything I do is to please you."

I nodded, wishing I could say the same. But my happiness was my own, and I couldn't be responsible for his, as well. "Thank you," I said quietly. "Before going back, could we go somewhere warmer and walk around a little?" It was dusk here by now, but it was still morning back home, and I was desperate to feel the sun on my skin again.

"Of course." He slipped his hand into my elbow, and while that small amount of contact was enough to make my skin prickle, I didn't pull away. I hated the resentment and anger that prevented me from loving him the way he loved me, but no matter what Hermes said, I lacked the strength to conquer it. All I could do was open myself up to my new life and hope that in the end, it would be enough.

* * *

I tried.

I tried harder than I'd ever tried anything before. Every morning I let Hades bring me breakfast in my new bedroom two doors down from his. Every day I forced chitchat as he taught me more and more about what it meant to rule the Underworld. Every evening I sat with

him as we read or talked about our shared day, and I tried so damn hard to love him that as time passed, I grew more and more certain that one day my heart would burst.

But the wall of resentment inside me didn't budge. Nothing Hades did or said wore it down, and no matter how hard I tried to work around it, it was always there. It was as if someone had cursed me into never falling in love, or at least never falling in love with Hades. We'd been friends before this, as much as we could've been, but even that was gone. Every tie that connected us had been severed, and that wall in my chest blocked every attempt I made to create new ones.

I was stuck. *We* were stuck. Whenever I looked at Hades, I could see the pain he carried with him, building up slowly from our restrained time together. But how could I explain my unnatural hatred toward him? Wouldn't it hurt him more if I told him that I didn't want anything to do with him? That I hated him so much it physically hurt me?

I had to pretend to care. And part of me did—I cared about how badly I was hurting him. I cared that I was lying to him. I cared that he was just as miserable as I was, if not more so. But every time we could have moved into the realm of something more, that wall was there, ever looming, ready to stop me.

Hades tried everything. Breakfast in bed, lavish gifts, even giving me free rein over the palace's interior decorating. I had a large patch of rock to work with outside as well, and over the years, I created a jeweled garden. It wasn't anything like the real thing, but it gave me time alone, time I needed to think, and Hades showered me with praise for it.

But nothing worked. We were frozen, not because of him, but because of me. And I didn't know how to fix it.

The days were endless, and though the seasons passed on the surface, nothing but my hair color changed in the Underworld. The rock pressed down on me constantly, trapping me without mercy, and the few times Hades brought me to the surface didn't make up for my prison. Mother only visited once, shortly after my tantrum in Olympus, and even then it was simply to make sure I was behaving.

Hermes, however, stuck to his word. Whenever he came down to train with Hades, he spent a little time with me. Playing games, talking, exploring what few parts of the Underworld I was willing to see—he was my lifeline, and things seemed a little brighter when he was there. He was the reminder I needed that life hadn't stopped completely. That there was still a world up there teeming with it.

One afternoon, I sat in the middle of the observatory, a long room at the very top of the palace that looked out across the vast cavern. It'd been empty when I'd discovered it, but I'd created an armchair for comfort, and the fireplace crackled with flames every time I entered. The entire length of the outer wall was made of glass, and I spent as much time up there as possible. One of my gifts was the ability to see the present, and sometimes, especially after a hard ruling, I liked to sit up there and go from afterlife to afterlife, reminding myself that what we did wasn't all bad. People lived whatever lives they wanted on the surface, and as Hades reminded me again and again, it wasn't our job to judge that. It was our job to judge what they thought was right. What they thought their afterlife should be. Most of the time, a soul went directly to their afterlife without any contact with Hades and me. But sometimes they were confused or didn't know or couldn't rectify their beliefs with their actions, and that was where we came in.

It was exhausting, judging eternities. But I did the best I could.

A soft knock cut through the room, and I pulled myself back into the present. I'd been watching a girl walking hand-in-hand through the woods with a young man. She'd clearly loved him in her life, and the fact that they'd found each other even after death...I envied her. I envied her so badly that I hated her. "Come in."

Someone slipped inside—no, not just someone. Two sets of footsteps too light to be Hades's echoed through the room. Frowning, I twisted around in my chair. Hermes walked toward me, and behind him, Aphrodite followed.

"Afternoon," said Hermes, giving me a boyish grin. "You look like hell."

"I feel like hell," I muttered, trying to push the thought of the girl away. She was mortal and dead, and she'd probably never held a jewel the size of a fist in her life. She was happier than I would ever

be though, no matter how many gifts Hades gave me. “What are you two doing here?”

“What, I’m not allowed to come by anymore?” he said, perching on the arm of the chair. Aphrodite wandered toward the window, setting her hand on the glass and smudging it. I winced, but the unseen servants who staffed Hades’s palace would clean it later.

“You know what I mean,” I said. “Why did you bring Aphrodite?” She practically glowed with eternal satisfaction, and seeing her only made the fire of jealousy inside me burn even hotter.

“Because I think I can help,” said Aphrodite, turning to face us. “If you let me, I mean.”

“Help how?” I said warily, finding Hermes’s hand. I didn’t trust Aphrodite, for all her good luck and happiness, but I did trust him.

“Hermes mentioned you’ve been having trouble adjusting,” she said with a hint of mischievousness that probably drove every man on earth wild. “How often do you and Hades sleep together?”

Just the thought of sleeping with Hades again made my skin crawl, and I narrowed my eyes. “Once. To consummate the marriage. If you tell my mother, I’ll rip your hair out.”

Aphrodite blinked, clearly stunned. “Why haven’t you two slept together since?”

I shrugged. I’d spoken to Hermes about this a few times, but it never got easier. And I didn’t know Aphrodite half as well as I knew him. “I don’t know. It’s just—I don’t love him. And every time I think about doing that kind of thing with him, it’s like a wall forms. I can’t move past it no matter how hard I try.”

“A wall?” she said, frowning. “But weren’t you two friends before you got married?”

I nodded. At least someone understood how little sense all of this made. “I don’t like the Underworld. It makes me feel trapped. And sleeping with him—it was horrible.”

“Everyone’s first time is horrible. Except mine, but, you know. Goddess of sex. Can’t really help it.”

“How did you do it?” I blurted. “How did you make yourself fall in love with Hephaestus?”

“I didn’t make myself,” she said. “I didn’t want to at first, you know. I mean, that’s why Ares and I ran away. But in the end...” She

shrugged. "Heph and I just fit together. We work, you know? There's really no substitute for that. I have lovers on the side, of course, but in a way it helps us."

Hermes snorted, and Aphrodite gave him a look. "I'm serious," she said. "I love him. I love what we have together, and he'll always be my home. At the end of the day, it's because of my affairs that I stay with him. It's because of them that I don't feel trapped."

If only it were that easy for me. I stared at my hand intertwined with Hermes's. "Hard to have an affair when I'm stuck down here the entire time," I mumbled.

"They're not for everyone," she agreed, twirling a lock of blond hair around her finger. "But there are other ways I could help you, if you'll let me."

"Help how?" I said. "Make me fall in love with him?"

She scoffed. "No one can make anyone fall in love with someone else. In lust, sure—Eros is really good at that. But I mean trying to help you break down that wall. Giving you a little nudge in the right direction."

I had no idea what she meant, and the more she talked about it, the tenser I became, until Hermes had to practically yank his hand from mine. While he was busy flexing his fingers, I said, "I don't know."

"Of course you do," she said. "You want to love Hades, right?"

I hesitated. I wanted to have the chance to choose for myself, and if that included falling in love with Hades, yes. But what if it didn't? What if, given the choice, I would've fallen in love with someone else? "I don't know what I want."

"You want to be happy. That's what everyone wants. And if you can't get out of this mess—"

"You don't know that I can't. Maybe Hades will change his mind and—"

"It isn't his mind to change," she said, and the moment she said it, her eyes widened, and she pressed her lips together. What the hell was she talking about?

"Aphrodite," said Hermes in a warning voice. "Spill. Now."

She sank onto the other arm of my chair, her expression falling. How was it possible that she could look so damn pretty all the time

no matter what mood she was in? “Daddy decided you had to marry Hades because he was jealous that Hera was spending so much time with him, and he didn’t want her to get any ideas.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Wait, *what?*”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” said Aphrodite. “Hera spent some time down here, remember? And Daddy was afraid she was having an affair. She wasn’t, of course, but it’s obvious she loves Hades—”

“As a brother,” I said. Everyone knew that. “Not as a husband. She’s *married*.”

“Yeah, well, so am I.” She gave me a little grin. “And whether Hera likes it or not, she’s as fallible as the rest of us. She just doesn’t act on it, that’s all.”

I shook my head. The idea of Hera being in love with Hades was ridiculous. “I don’t believe you. She might love him, but that doesn’t mean she’s *in* love with him. He’s a nice guy, and Zeus isn’t. No wonder she ran down here to get away from him.”

Aphrodite inspected her nails. “If that’s what you want to believe, so be it. I could be wrong.”

“You are,” I said. “And even if you aren’t, Hades loves me.”

She arched an eyebrow. “So although you don’t love him, you relish the fact that he loves you.”

“Not relish.” The word sounded bitter on my tongue. “Just—it’s a fact. He does.”

“Yes, he does,” she conceded. “More than he’s loved anyone. And this is hurting him as much as it’s hurting you—”

“You think I don’t know that?” I snapped, my temper frayed. Whether it was from her spreading lies about Hera or the way she treated all of this like a game, I didn’t know. Maybe it was jealousy. But either way, the thought of accepting her offer made me sick to my stomach. “I don’t need your help, Aphrodite. If this is going to happen, it won’t be because you decide it should.”

She frowned. “That’s not how—”

“I don’t care, all right? All I want is my life back. And if you can’t give that to me—if the only other alternative is tricking me into feeling like I love him even though I don’t—then no thank you. I don’t want to be a slave to illusion.”

Two pink spots appeared on her cheeks. “Fine. If you’re not even open to the idea, then there’s no point.”

“You’re right, there isn’t.”

Huffing, she stood and ran her fingers through her hair. “I’m going back to Olympus. Hermes, are you coming?”

“Go on. I’ll catch up,” he said, and though he’d been quiet for most of the argument, he took my hand again.

Aphrodite stormed out of the room, and as soon as the door clicked behind her, a dam broke inside me. All of the frustration and anger and despair I’d swallowed since the day I’d married Hades flooded out, and I burst into tears.

After a moment’s hesitation, Hermes pulled me into an awkward hug, and I buried my face in his chest. It wasn’t fair. Aphrodite thought she had it all figured out, but she wasn’t stuck down here. She could leave whenever she wanted, and she had a husband she loved as much as he loved her. Her arranged marriage had worked.

But mine was failing. I’d tried everything—forcing myself to love Hades, letting myself grow into it, and everything in between. Nothing was working, and I was never going to have the chance to live the life I wanted.

And of course it was Zeus’s fault. Everything was. I’d never been ashamed to be his daughter before, but now, knowing what he’d been willing to do in order to protect his own interests, to keep Hera as caged as I was—

“Hey,” said Hermes. “You’re all right. Everything will be okay.”

But no matter how many times he repeated it, he was wrong, and neither of us could change a thing. “This can’t be my eternity, Hermes.”

“It won’t be. I’ll do whatever I have to do to make sure it isn’t.”

I held him tighter, my shoulders shaking with sobs. I wasn’t supposed to break down like this. Mother had raised me better—she’d raised me to adapt, to accept that not everything would go my way, but I couldn’t be that girl right now. Somewhere in the middle of that bitterness and pain, I’d given up on her, and now the only person I could be was me.

At last I managed to stop crying, and he kissed the top of my head. “You’re my best friend,” he said. “You matter to me. You matter

to all of us, even if it doesn't feel that way. Don't forget that, all right?"

I nodded. Even when everything else was falling to pieces, Hermes would be there. I was sure of it.

Once he left, I took a shaky breath and righted myself, gazing out across the cavern. The River Styx flowed through the stone, carving a path older than all of us. What would it be like to be on the other side? To live knowing there would be an end someday? Mortals didn't all know about the Underworld, and those who did only suspected, really. They believed, but they'd never been down here, and once they died, they never left to tell their family and friends about it. What would it be like to face that inevitable unknown?

In a way, I envied them. No matter how terrible their lives were, they would have a chance to escape it in the end. I wouldn't.

Closing my eyes, I let my mind drift. I couldn't stomach going back to the happy couple in the woods, so instead I focused on someone I wanted to see—Hermes. I slipped into a vision, viewing the present as it was happening, and my heart skipped a beat. Hermes stood in the throne room, empty except for Hades, and he stared my so-called husband straight in the eye.

"If you don't let her go, she's going to wither. You know that. You see it every day. So why delay the inevitable?"

Hades frowned. "You speak as if you know exactly what is happening."

"I know you love her so much that you're in agony," said Hermes. "I know she doesn't love you, but she's trying to force herself to anyway because she knows how much it's hurting you. I know you're doing everything you possibly can to make her happy, and I know despite that, she feels trapped down here. And I suspect that you feel caged, too."

I held my breath, wavering between anger and relief. At least someone was finally saying everything Hades needed to hear, but it should've come from me. Not Hermes. I owed Hades that much.

But I couldn't interact with the present; all I could do was watch, and though it occurred to me that I could end this vision and join them, I was too much of a coward to do so. This way, Hades could make a decision without my interference. Or at least, that's what I wanted to believe.

“And what would you have me do?” said Hades quietly. “Abandon her? It may be difficult for both of us, but given time—”

“You’ve both had plenty of time,” said Hermes.

“One cannot expect change to happen quickly. It may take centuries, eons—”

“You’d do that to her?” said Hermes. “You’d trap her down here for that long, knowing how miserable she is?”

Hades hesitated. “It is none of your concern.”

“When my best friend feels like she’s being held hostage, it is damn well my concern,” he snapped. I winced, and so did Hades. Wrong choice of words for sure, but in a way, it was the truth. Except now I knew that it wasn’t Hades holding the key.

“Leave,” he said in a low voice that by itself wasn’t much, but combined with the thrum of power that filled the throne room, it was deadly. Hermes opened his mouth as if he was going to protest, but at the last minute, he closed it again and turned on his heel.

When the door slammed shut, Hades closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Whether to calm himself or work up enough courage to talk himself into something, I couldn’t tell, but after three heartbeats, he disappeared.

Oh, hell. No doubt where he’d gone. I pulled myself back into the observatory just in time to see Hades arrive beside the armchair. So much for privacy.

“I am sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he said, a hint of a break in his voice. Whatever he was thinking, he was struggling with it.

“You didn’t,” I said, straightening. “I was just—you know. Watching.”

“Anyone in particular?” he said, and I shook my head. No need to let him know I’d heard everything.

He stood there awkwardly for a long moment, his hands folded in front of him, and together we stared out the window. At last, when I was certain he wouldn’t say anything at all, he cleared his throat.

“Are you happy?”

I blinked. He really didn’t know? “No. Not because of you,” I added hastily. “But—it’s this place. It’s suffocating.” Whether my hatred for the Underworld had become nothing more than an excuse or if it really was the root of my unyielding bitterness, I didn’t know. And I

didn't particularly care either way. I'd already done everything I could think of to fix it.

"I see," said Hades, and another moment passed before he said, "What would it take to make you so?"

I hesitated. A thousand thoughts came to mind, each more ridiculous than the last, but there was only one thing I really wanted. "I want a choice," I said. "I want the chance to choose this life for myself."

"And how would I be able to give that to you?"

"I—" I paused. If I lied now, I might never have another chance like this. We might never have another chance like this, and lying would only bring more pain in the long run. "Freedom. Let me go. Give me a divorce."

Agony I hadn't expected flashed across his face. Whatever I was to him, it was more than I'd realized. Much, much more. That wasn't the pain of a man losing his pride. That was the pain of a man losing everything he loved.

"I cannot do that," he said, his words little more than a whisper. "If it were in my power, I would give you everything you desired, including a divorce. But the bonds that tie you to the Underworld as its queen are stronger than even I am."

Any and all hope drained from me, leaving me hollow and numb. Whether it was true or not, of course he would hide behind my vow to the Underworld. If I'd been capable of shedding more tears, I would have, but as it was, I was completely empty.

So this was it. This was my life from here on out—a slave not only to a husband I didn't love, but to a realm I hated with every breath in my body. Everyone would have a happy ending except me.

And Hades, I realized, glancing at him out of the corner of my eye. His fate was tied with mine, and he looked almost gray in the low candlelight. This wasn't just my life we were talking about. It was his, as well.

He'd known what he was getting into when he'd agreed to marry me, though. He knew this was a possibility, that I would never love him. Or maybe it'd never occurred to him. Either way, he'd made his choice; he'd had one to make in the first place. I hadn't.

I started to stand. I wanted to be anywhere but there—even his bedroom would've been better than this, as long as he wasn't there, too. But as soon as I straightened, he turned to me, his eyes glistening in the firelight.

“What if...” He swallowed. I'd never seen him at a loss like this before, and it broke every good thing inside me. “What if I were to give you a choice?”

I folded my arms over my chest, hugging myself. “You just said you couldn't.”

“I cannot allow you to leave permanently,” he agreed slowly, his focus fixed on something over my shoulder. “But if you were to return and help me rule on a regular basis...”

My heart began to pound. “What do you mean?”

At last he looked at me, and his silver eyes, so crowded with everything he couldn't say, sent a shiver down my spine. “If I were to give you half of every year to do with as you will...would that make you happy?”

Half a year. Half of the rest of my life. Was he serious? I watched him closely for any signs it was an empty offer, but everything about him was sincere. “Yes,” I said, a thread of hope weaving its way through me. Freedom. Real freedom, even if it was only temporary. “That would make me happy.”

He nodded once, twice, three times, as if trying to convince himself. “Then—that is what I will do. From sunrise on the spring equinox to sunrise on the autumnal equinox, you may spend your time wherever you would like. In Olympus, on the surface, even—” He cleared his throat. “Even down here, if you wish.”

We both knew that wouldn't happen, but I took his hand anyway. “Thank you,” I whispered. “I can't tell you how grateful I am.”

I couldn't let myself believe it, not yet, not until I felt the sunshine on my skin and the wind in my hair, but the crushing look of loss on his face all but confirmed his offer was real. “You do not have to,” he said. “Your happiness is all the thanks I need, and it is all I ask in return. Just come back to me.”

Against my better judgment, knowing it might only hurt him more, I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. It was the most intimate contact we'd had since our wedding night. “I will. Thank you.”

Rather than blush or give me a boyish smile, as Hermes might've done, Hades let go of my hand and stepped back. Without saying a word, he gave me one more tight nod, and the next moment, he was gone.

I sank back into my chair, elation and dread tumbling around inside me. Finally I would have what I wanted—a chance to live my own life, even if it was really only a half life. But at the same time, the pain on Hades's face, the thought of what Mother would say—

No. I was done worrying about what everyone else wanted for me. This was my life, my world, my future, not theirs. And now that I had a second chance, I wasn't about to give it up again. Not for anyone.

Part Two

True to his word, Hades brought me to the surface on the spring equinox. He'd said little all morning, and as we arrived in a cool meadow, he was silent. As soon as we were on steady ground, he dropped my hand, and I hesitated.

"Thanks," I said at last, and I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. "I'll see you soon."

He nodded once, and before I could say another word, he disappeared. I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of nature even as a fist tightened around my heart. But I would come back to him eventually, much happier than I had been, and in the meantime, I could do what I wanted. We both lost, yes, but we both won, as well.

"Persephone?" Mother's voice cut through the dewy morning air, and I wasted no time. One moment I stood alone in the middle of the meadow, and the next I barreled straight into her open arms. It didn't matter that this was only temporary. Being here with her made me soar.

"I missed you," I mumbled into her chest, and she wrapped her arms around me in a secure embrace.

"As I missed you," she said, but there was a hint of something I hadn't expected in her voice—disappointment.

I clenched my jaw. If what Aphrodite had said was true and Mother and Zeus had married me off to Hades as some sort of twisted revenge on Hera, then she had no right to be disappointed. None at all.

But even that momentary spark of anger couldn't ruin the morning, and I slipped out of her hug and took her hand. We had two entire seasons to talk. Right now, I was going to relish my freedom and forget every awful feeling that had built up inside me in the Underworld. I wasn't going to waste this, not for anything.

"Come, my darling," she said, leading me into the forest. "Let's go home."

* * *

Home turned out to be a small cottage on the edge of a clearing deep in the woods. By the time we reached it, I had no idea where we'd gone or how we'd gotten there, but I didn't care. As long as it wasn't the Underworld, I would follow her anywhere.

It was small, one room divided into a cooking area, a sleeping area and a place to sit. Flowers and herbs hung from the rafters, creating a dizzying scent, and everything was handcrafted, as if she'd hired mortals to build it for her.

Zeus would've hated it. I loved it instantly.

We settled in, but the roof over my head reminded me of my constant claustrophobia in the Underworld, so soon enough we moved outside. Together we tended the tidy garden, and sometime in midafternoon, I worked up the courage to ask the question that had haunted me ever since Aphrodite had mentioned it.

"Did you marry me off to Hades because of Hera?"

Mother looked at me, her eyes wide, and her mouth formed a small circle. Dirt streaked across her face, and in her hands she cupped the beginnings of an orchid encased in earth. "What?"

My cheeks burned, but it was too late to back down now.

"Someone told me that you made me marry Hades because Zeus wanted to make sure he wouldn't have an affair with Hera."

She said nothing as she gently set the flower in its new home. Once it was properly in place, she sat back on her heels and wiped her hands. "Who told you that?"

I shook my head. I may have envied Aphrodite to the point that it actually hurt, but I wasn't about to betray her trust. "A reliable source."

"Ah, yes. The world seems to be full of those." She sighed. "It's no small wonder that Hera isn't happy about your marriage. You know how she feels about Zeus's illegitimate children. I don't blame her in the slightest, and a very large part of me feels a great deal of shame for betraying her in such a way. But I can't regret it, not when the result was you."

She set her hand over mine, and while I didn't pull away, I didn't take hers, either. "You're avoiding the question."

Mother pursed her lips. "I don't know what to tell you, my darling. Only that I arranged your marriage because Hades is a wonderful man, and I could think of no one who could possibly love you more."

"So Zeus had nothing to do with it?" I said. She hesitated.

"Zeus was the one to suggest him, certainly, but—"

"Is Hera in love with Hades?"

She blinked. "What makes you say that?"

"Is she?"

Mother rubbed her cheek, causing the streak of dirt to spread. "We all love Hades very much. Perhaps it is because he is the best of us all, or perhaps distance has something to do with it. We know each other so intimately in Olympus, but Hades is removed from us, and it is easy to forget his flaws. As far as I know, however, while Hera loves Hades as a brother, she has no interest in him as a lover. She is faithful to Zeus, as much as that pains her."

That was sort of an answer, at least. A half answer, but an answer nonetheless. "So Zeus didn't suggest I marry Hades simply because he wanted to make sure Hera was kept on a tight leash?"

Mother laughed, but there was something oddly humorless about it. "Oh, sweetheart. Hera does only what she wants. If she wanted Hades as a lover, she would have him, but she is far too devoted to her duties to ever betray the council that way. Zeus and I discussed all of our options, and in the end, we thought Hades would be the best match for you."

"And Hades? What did he think?"

"He was intrigued," she said. "He needed help with his duties, with the way the world is expanding, and he agreed so long as you were willing."

Willing. Funny how my definition seemed so different from my parents'. At least now I knew that if Hades had been aware of my hesitations, he would've never gone through with our marriage. That was a small comfort. "Did it never occur to you that I might want to decide on my own?"

"Darling." She squeezed my hand. I didn't squeeze back. "Yes, it occurred to me. Many, many times. But I was so certain you would love Hades as much as we all do, and he was in desperate need of help. I can't tell you how deeply sorry I am that your marriage has

caused both of you so much pain, but I haven't given up hope yet. None of us have. And perhaps this time away will do you both some good."

I was silent. If that was the reason she'd agreed to this summer—because she saw it as a way to convince me a marriage with Hades wasn't so bad after all—then I had nothing more to say. I would be his queen for eternity; if Hades couldn't sever that tie, then there was nothing anyone could do. But this half year was mine to live as I wanted, not to pine over a husband I didn't love or a realm I hated.

I loved Mother. I loved our family. But the more I opened my eyes to the world around me, the more I began to realize that she and I wanted very different things for my life. And I was no longer afraid to tell her no.

* * *

Hermes came to visit that night, long after the sun had set. Mother answered the knock on the door, but when she invited him in, the suspicion behind her smile made me nervous. It wasn't the kind of smile she gave guests—it was the kind she gave Hera when they were forced to play nice. I intercepted them, looping my arm in Hermes's. "Why don't we go for a walk?" I said, and he nodded.

"That's what I was going to suggest, actually."

I forced a grin. "Perfect. We'll be back soon, Mother."

Without giving her a chance to protest, I led Hermes out of the cottage and through the garden. As soon as we ducked into the forest and out of Mother's line of sight, I exhaled.

"I'm sorry," I said. "She's been on edge."

"Don't apologize." Hermes stepped over a fallen tree and offered me a hand. I didn't need his help, but I took it anyway. "She's rooting for you and Hades to work out. Everyone is."

"I'm not so sure it will," I admitted.

"Maybe it will, maybe it won't," he said. "But right now you're not going to think about him at all, because I have a surprise for you."

I brightened. Hades brought me surprises practically every other day, but the thrill of anticipation ran through me anyway. It meant more somehow, coming from Hermes. "What kind of surprise?"

“That’s a secret,” he said with a grin. “It does come with a price, though—you have to trust me and close your eyes when I say so.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You expect me to let you lead me through an unfamiliar forest in the middle of the night?”

“And I expect you not to peek, either.”

I sighed dramatically. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust him—I did, and a few falls wouldn’t exactly hurt either of us—but what little control I had lately was precious to me. And he must’ve known that. “Oh, fine,” I said. “Just don’t get us lost.”

“Me, get us lost?” He snorted. “I’m more likely to get us killed.”

“And that’s supposed to boost my confidence in you how?” I said with a grin. I hadn’t felt this good in ages.

At last, as we approached a clearing, Hermes stopped. “Close your eyes,” he said, and I obeyed, my heart fluttering. He may not have had access to the riches Hades did, but that made this all the better.

Step by step, he led me through the remaining trees, artfully avoiding every stone and root. The air changed once we reached the meadow, cooler now that the forest canopy wasn’t above us. “Can I open them now?”

“Almost,” he said. “Just two more steps and...now.”

I opened my eyes and gasped. At our feet was a midnight picnic, with fruits and meats and nectar, but that wasn’t the part that took my breath away. Above us, the night sky twinkled with countless stars, somehow brighter and more stunning than I remembered. Away from the light of dusk, they glittered, and I sank to the ground beside the picnic. I’d never seen anything more beautiful in my life.

“It’s incredible,” I whispered. “You’ve no idea how much I’ve missed this.”

“I figured you might like it,” said Hermes, and he sat down beside me. “Zeus likes to create fables to go along with them, you know. Most of them are based on us. Like that cluster right there—the Pleiades. One of the stars is called Maia, after my mother.”

“Do I have one yet?” I said, and he chuckled.

“Not that I know of, but I’ll make sure to get right on that.”

I grinned, but that soon faded into a wistful smile. “No one’s ever done anything like this for me before.”

“What, show you the stars?” he said, and he offered me a pomegranate. My favorite fruit, and the kind Hades brought me for breakfast every day. I shook my head. Not tonight. Not while I was on the surface. I didn’t want that reminder.

“Do something nice for me that didn’t have strings attached,” I said.

He shrugged, but even in the darkness, I could see his ears turn pink. “It’s just a picnic.”

It wasn’t, though. All of Hades’s gestures, all of his gifts, they weren’t things I wanted. They were things he’d hoped I would like, but I hadn’t *needed* any of them. This, however—the stars, the open sky, the taste of freedom no matter how fleeting it was—this was what I’d been searching for.

I lay in the grass, picnic forgotten for now as I stared up at the sky. Hermes lay beside me, and I groped around until I found his hand. “I heard what you said to Hades.”

Silence. “You did?”

“Yes.” Tearing my gaze from the stars, I looked at him. “Thank you. For sticking up for me, for saying what he needed to hear—”

“Zeus wasn’t happy with me,” he admitted.

“Zeus is never happy with anyone. He didn’t punish you, did he?”

“Just a verbal thrashing in front of the council. It happens.”

I brushed my thumb against the palm of his hand. “I know it isn’t much, but I would’ve never been this happy again if it wasn’t for you.”

He met my gaze, a small smile playing on his lips. “That’s all the thanks I need.”

I wasn’t sure who moved in first, or if we both got the same idea at the same time. I wasn’t sure it even mattered. One moment we lay there side by side, and the next he was kissing me, and I was kissing him, and the whole world seemed to go quiet.

This wasn’t just lips against lips; this was warmth and comfort and safety and knowing he cared enough about me to risk his own neck. Not because he needed help ruling, not because I was promised to him, but because he saw me, flaws and all, and he cared anyway.

I wrapped myself around him, wanting to be closer to someone for the first time in my life. This wasn’t like my wedding night; there was

no pressure, no expectations, and I wanted this. I wanted him.

He didn't stop me, and I didn't stop him. At last I understood what Aphrodite was always going on about and why Zeus tested Hera time and time again. This warmth, this comfort, this all-encompassing love—this was what I was meant to feel. Not hurt or guilt or chains. I kissed him deeper, needing to be as close to him as possible; and underneath those glittering stars, he set me free.

As long as I had this, I always would be.

* * *

I returned to the cottage at dawn, my hair tangled and my step lighter than it'd been since I'd first entered the Underworld. Mother took one look at me, and her face fell.

"Persephone. You didn't."

I breezed past her. I'd cleaned up in a stream, of course, but I needed my comb. "Don't worry about it, Mother."

"Of course I will. This is your marriage." She followed me through the small cottage. "Sweetheart—"

"Don't." I whirled around to face her, brandishing my comb like a sword. "I'm not with Hades right now. I haven't been *with* him since we got married, and right now, I can do whatever I want. I'm *supposed* to do whatever makes me happy."

"Even if it destroys him?" she said, and I shook my head.

"You don't get it, Mother. He made this choice, and it isn't my fault he loves me, all right? It isn't my fault we can't be happy together. I've tried, we've both tried, but it isn't working."

She sat down on the edge of the bed, and I pulled the comb angrily through my hair. Leave it to her to ruin an otherwise perfect night. "Do you even intend to go back?" she said quietly.

"Of course," I snapped. "I won't abandon him, but I'm not going to waste this chance, either. I finally get to be *happy*, Mother. Why aren't you okay with that? Because it isn't the happy ending you wanted for me?"

"Because it isn't a happy ending at all," she said, as gentle as ever. "And as long as you continue down this path, you'll never find it."

“And you think I will with Hades?”

“Yes. Otherwise I would have never asked you to marry him.”

“You didn’t ask me to marry him. You *told* me. And you were wrong, Mother—I’m sorry, I know it must break your heart, but you and Zeus were wrong. We aren’t happy. I’m not happy, and the more you try to pretend, the more it’s going to hurt all of us. So just let it go, all right?”

I stormed into the cooking area, starting the fire with a wave of my hand. I wasn’t hungry, and we didn’t need to eat, but the ritual of cooking calmed me, and I hadn’t had the chance in a very long time. This wasn’t how things were supposed to go. Mother was supposed to understand, even if she didn’t like it. That’s what she always did: she understood. And there was nothing wrong with me and Hermes. He made me happy, and if she was so worried about it hurting Hades, then he would never have to know. I certainly had no intention of telling him.

“Persephone.” She set her hand on my shoulder, and I shrugged it off. “We all make mistakes—”

“This isn’t a mistake.”

“Rarely does a mistake feel like one at the time,” she said. “All I’m asking is that you don’t jump headfirst into something you can’t stop. And by hurting Hades—”

“I already hurt him. Every second I’m down there, miserable and alone and hating it, I hurt him. At least this way I can be happy, and we both get what we want.”

“And how does he get what he wants?” said Mother.

“By me not being so miserable, even if it’s just for a while.” I turned to face her. “Please, Mother. Just give me this. Let me be happy.”

Her eyes locked on mine for the space of several heartbeats, and at last she sighed. “I cannot condone it, but I will not forbid it, either. If you insist on letting this happen, then I must also insist that when you return to the Underworld, you act as you should. You rule beside Hades without complaint, and you let this happiness bleed into your time down there, as well. Can you do that?”

I nodded. If it meant I could spend the summer with Hermes, then I would. “Thank you.”

She pressed her lips to my forehead. "I want you to be happy, too, my darling, but not at the expense of others. Just be careful. You're playing a dangerous game."

"I know." I let her hug me, resting my head on her shoulder as she ran her fingers through my hair. "But he makes me happy."

She sighed. "Then for your sake, I hope that is enough for us all."

* * *

That summer was the best of my life. Mother and I spent every day together, sometimes with Hermes, sometimes without; but he and I spent every night together, as well. We explored the forest, swam in the cool lakes, and never once did I feel an ounce of guilt about betraying Hades. How could I, when he was the one who wanted me to be happy?

But it couldn't last forever, and finally the autumnal equinox arrived. Hermes and I both agreed we would halt our affair while I was with Hades, though of course I would see him often in the Underworld as a friend. The prospect of getting to spend time with Hermes no matter what realm I was in made giving up the surface a little easier to bear.

Mother led me to the clearing where Hades had dropped me off the spring before, and he was there waiting for us, his hair shining in the morning light. He really was beautiful, in a way Hermes would never be, but Mother had been wrong. My time away hadn't made me any fonder of him, and the moment our eyes met, that unyielding bitterness returned. There was something new on my side now though—contentment, and not the sort I had to fake. We might never be able to break down the wall between us, but at least we could both accept our fate.

"Persephone," he said quietly, offering me his arm. I kissed Mother goodbye and took it. "You look well."

"I feel well," I said, and I did. Even the dark power that surrounded him couldn't spoil my good mood. I felt lighter somehow, and Hades must have sensed it, because he gave me a small smile.

"I am glad."

The trip into the Underworld wasn't so bad this time, and the rock that surrounded us didn't feel quite so heavy now that I knew it wasn't permanent. Half a year, that was it; then I would be free to be with Hermes again. I could do that.

I expected the usual round of duties when we returned to his palace, but instead he stopped me in the antechamber that led into the throne room. For a moment he said nothing as he stared at the floor, his face stony. I frowned. What was going on?

"You are happy, yes?" he said. "With..."

My entire body went cold. Hermes. He knew. Had Hades been spying on me?

No, he wouldn't. He may have been many things, but a sneak wasn't one of them. Mother had told him—she must have. Why? To hurt him? To make me feel guilty? To make sure I couldn't play him like a fool?

But I didn't think of him as a fool, and neither did Hermes. I'd kept this a secret not to hurt him, but to make sure I didn't. And Mother had to go and ruin it all.

I swallowed, the words stuck in my throat. "Yes," I finally said. "I'm happy. And—that's just the summer, all right? Down here, you and I are...whatever we are. These seasons are yours."

He nodded, not quite meeting my eye. "Very well. So long as you are happy, that was all I wanted."

The pain behind his words coiled around my insides until it nearly suffocated me. Why had Mother done this? She must've known how much it would hurt him. "I'm sorry Mother told you," I said quietly. "I never meant for you to find out. I knew it would hurt you, and we weren't going to continue it down here, and—"

He shook his head. "Your mother did not tell me."

I blinked. "Then who?" Who else knew?

Hades was silent, and he took my arm as the doors into the throne room opened. Rows of the dead turned to watch us, and at the end of the aisle, standing beside Hades's throne, was Hermes.

Of course. He was the only other person who knew. Why had he told? Absolution? To ease his guilt?

Whatever it was, I glared at him as Hades and I reached our thrones. *Did you really have to tell?*

Yes. His voice whispered through me, for my mind only. *I don't want us to be a secret, not from Hades.*

You hurt him. Badly.

We both did.

I sat down in my throne, tearing my eyes away from him and focusing instead on the faces of the dead awaiting judgment. The first one moved before us, her head bowed as Hades addressed her, but I was deaf to his words. *I wish you hadn't.*

I'm sorry. I respect him too much to go behind his back like that.

Yet you don't respect him enough to keep your hands off his wife in the first place?

You were free to do whatever you wanted then. But I won't keep it a secret from him, either. He deserves better than that.

He did, and I hated myself for agreeing. *He knows we aren't together while I'm down here?*

Yes.

And he's all right with that?

As all right as anyone could be. He loves you. He wants to see you happy as much as I do.

You have a strange way of showing it.

Hermes didn't reply. Between us, Hades sat stiffly, his eyes blank as the woman talked about her life. Slowly, as if it were the most casual thing in the world, I set my hand over his. I hadn't meant to hurt him, but I'd been a fool to think I never would. There were consequences for everything. Even happiness.

As much pain as it caused him though, that was a price I was willing to pay.

* * *

Despite that first day, Hades and I settled back into our old routine, this time with genuine friendship between us. I managed to carry the contentment of my summer into our time together, and as the years passed and I went back and forth between him and Hermes, I continued to do the same.

It wasn't simple, but the uneasy truce between the three of us became all but permanent. Years turned into decades and decades

into centuries; before long, I'd lost all track of time, my only benchmarks the beginning of spring and the end of summer.

But we were happy. Even Hades eventually adjusted, and I no longer saw pain in his eyes when he met me in the meadow every autumn. Instead he seemed pleased to see me once more, and slowly I grew to be happy to see him, as well. I hated the Underworld, and that wall between us was as strong as ever, but his understanding made me more accepting of his world.

Nothing changed for a long time. But one day, as I lingered in the observatory after we'd finished our judgments, I closed my eyes and did something I'd done thousands of times before: I found Hermes. Summer was only a short time away, and I was anxious to be with him again.

He was in his chambers in Olympus, standing on his balcony as the sun reflected off his light hair. And he wasn't alone. That wasn't anything unusual—he was social by nature, the complete opposite of Hades, and he usually spent a great deal of time with our brothers and sisters. But this time it was Aphrodite who stood beside him.

And she was naked.

Not that *that* was anything unusual, either, but the way she hugged his arm to her chest, the way he touched her—

I was going to be sick.

Hermes and I had never talked about what he did during the winters. He knew I wasn't with Hades, not like that, and I'd always let myself believe that he waited for me. Maybe most of the time he did. But we didn't have any rules about our time apart, and I had no right to feel as furious as I did.

It was Aphrodite though—the goddess who had everything. Love, satisfaction, a perfect life, a happy marriage. And now she was taking the one thing I had that was mine, the one damn thing in the world that gave me any amount of real joy.

But Hermes certainly didn't seem to be complaining.

How dare you. I pushed the thought upward with every ounce of strength I had. It still took ages to reach Hermes, but when it did, his eyes widened, and he immediately moved away from Aphrodite. His cheeks turned red, and when she tried to rejoin him, he sidestepped her. So he knew he was doing something wrong, after all.

“Persephone, please—I’ll explain everything later.”

Like hell he would. Like hell I would let him. What would he say, that Aphrodite had accidentally slipped into his arms? That it was only a onetime thing? That he’d missed me and he was lonely, and he couldn’t wait any longer?

This is over. Don’t bother to come by this summer, because you and I are done.

“Persephone?” said Aphrodite, and she looked around. “She’s watching?”

I didn’t bother to wait for Hermes’s response. I pulled myself back into the observatory so quickly that for the first time since mastering my powers, I grew dizzy. I sat there for a long moment, my head between my knees, and struggled not to break down.

What else had I expected? He was Zeus’s son as surely as I was Zeus’s daughter. Cheating was in our blood. But no matter how many times I’d done it to Hades, that slap in the face—that complete and utter betrayal—had never hit home for me before.

My face was hot, and tears prickled in my eyes, but I refused to let them go. Instead I forced myself to breathe in and out slowly, counting each breath. Hermes loved me; I was certain of that. But why had he gone to Aphrodite? Was half a year really so long to wait?

Or had she seduced him? Were Ares and Hephaestus and Poseidon not enough for her?

Of course not. This was Aphrodite. She could never have enough, and she took whatever she wanted without a second thought. Mother may have considered me selfish, but I was nothing compared to my sister.

The door to the observatory opened and shut, and I wiped my dry cheeks angrily. I wanted to hurt something. I wanted to wrap my hands around Hermes’s neck and squeeze. It wouldn’t kill him, but it would help me feel a hell of a lot better.

“Persephone?”

And now I might have my chance. I straightened, my eyes narrowing as I focused on Hermes. He looked as if he’d dressed in a hurry, his clothing rumpled and his hair a mess. At least he’d bothered at all. “I told you not to come.”

“Actually, you didn’t,” he said, shuffling his feet. “You said we were over, but—”

“And we are, so you have no business here,” I snapped. His expression crumpled.

“Persephone, come on. I’m sorry. It was just once—”

“And I happened to peek in at the exact wrong moment?”

“You never said I couldn’t see anyone else during the winter.”

“I never said you could, either.”

He exhaled. “What’s really bothering you? Did you have a fight with Hades?”

I stared at him. He really didn’t get it, did he? “What’s *bothering* me is the fact that out of all the girls and goddesses in the world, you had to sleep with Aphrodite.”

“And what’s wrong with her?”

“She’s *Aphrodite*. She has Ares, she has Hephaestus, she has every damn person she wants. You’re mine. You’re the only person I have, and she—she steals you like it’s no big deal—”

“Nobody stole me.” He knelt down in front of my chair, careful not to touch me. “I’m still yours. I’ll always be yours, and I’m sorry about being with Aphrodite. You’re right, it wasn’t fair to you, and I should’ve asked you first.”

I took a deep, shaky breath. “It doesn’t matter. We’re over.”

“Persephone—”

“No.” I stood and moved around him, narrowly avoiding kneeling him in the chin. “I was happy because of you, and I can’t be that happy ever again, not when I know what you did with her. You stole that from me—you *both* stole that from me, and I will never forgive you for it.”

“Persephone, come on, don’t be like this—”

“Don’t be like what? Angry? Upset? Hurt?” I whirled around to face him. “Why did you do it? Out of all the girls you could’ve slept with, why her?”

He hesitated, looking to his left for a moment. “Because—I don’t know, all right? It’s Aphrodite. If she wants you, you can’t say no.”

I balled my hands into fists. “Wrong answer.”

As I stormed toward the door, the sound of his footsteps scrambling behind me echoed through the long room. “I’m sorry, all

right? She was there, you weren't, and it isn't fair, but it won't happen again. Ever. I love you."

"If you really loved me, you would've never touched her in the first place." I flung open the door. "Hades would've never done that to me."

I glanced over my shoulder in time to see the stunned look on his face. "Hades? You're really going to compare me to Hades now? You don't even love him. You don't even want to be with him."

"If you're my only other option, then maybe he isn't so bad after all," I snapped. "Leave, Hermes. I don't want you here anymore."

With as much dignity as I could muster, I walked out of the room and down the spiral staircase that led to the lower floors. My eyes brimmed with tears, but by the time I reached my destination, I'd blinked them away without shedding a single one. Hermes wasn't worth it. I would've given him everything, but if he couldn't spare me honesty or fidelity—

I was an idiot for expecting him to stick with me. No one ever did. Not even Mother had much love left for me anymore, not after my failed marriage and centuries of being with Hermes. The only constants in my life were the seasons and Hades. No matter what I did to him, no matter how I acted, he was there for me without complaint. Always.

I should have loved him. I should've loved him so much that I ached over the thought of having hurt him. I wanted to so badly that part of me did, but that wall was still there, preventing anything real.

I hated that wall, and if it were possible, I would've ripped it down with my bare hands. Loving Hades should've been the easiest thing I'd ever done. He was a good man. Better than me, better than Hermes, better than every god and goddess who dared to call themselves Olympians. In a pit of deceit and jealousy, he was the one thing that hadn't been tainted by time. And I'd hurt him again and again.

Without bothering to knock, I burst into Hades's chambers. He sat at his desk, shuffling through scrolls and parchment, and he looked up as I strode over to him. "Persephone?" he said, a hint of confusion in his voice. No wonder, either, since I hadn't stepped foot in his chambers since our wedding night. "To what do I owe—"

Before he could finish, I crawled into his lap and kissed him. Not the kind of hesitant kiss we'd shared few times before, but the burning kisses I'd shared with Hermes. The kind that filled me with fire, all-encompassing and eternal. The kind that begged for more no matter how much I'd already fed it. It was the kind of kiss that no one, not even Hades, could ignore.

And he didn't. For a long moment, he didn't move—he didn't touch me, he didn't kiss me back, he didn't react at all. But at last his hands found my hips, and his lips moved against mine with equal fervor.

That wall inside me loomed, as dark and resentful as before, but despite the way my entire body screamed for me to stop, I kept going. His touch burned my skin, and that hatred wrapped around me so completely that I could barely breathe. But I needed this. I needed to be loved, even if the only person who could do it was the man I couldn't stand.

"Bed," I whispered between kisses, leaving no room for negotiating. He lifted me up without protest, and I wrapped my legs around his waist as he carried me across the room. I'd sworn to myself I would never go back here, but as he laid me down amongst the silk, I steeled myself against my body's protests and pulled him down with me.

I don't know how long we kissed—long enough for both of us to get undressed, long enough for us to be seconds away from doing something neither of us had thought we'd ever do again. But before we got that far, Hades broke the kiss, his eyes searching mine.

"You're sure?" he whispered, and after a split second, I forced myself to nod. He loved me—I could see it in the way he looked at me, feel it in the way he touched me, everything. He loved me in a way Hermes never would, and I was an idiot for throwing all of that away without even trying. I knew what love was supposed to feel like now, and I could have that with Hades if I tried. I just had to want it bad enough.

He kissed me again, gentler this time, but he still didn't close the gap between us. "Why now?" he murmured, brushing his lips against the curve of my neck. I let out a frustrated groan.

“Because—because,” I said, my voice breaking. “Because I want to, and you love me, and—can’t we at least try?”

Hades pulled away enough to look me in the eye. “And what about Hermes?”

I swallowed, and something must have flickered across my face, because Hades frowned. “It’s over with him,” I said. “Please, can’t we just...?”

“Do you love me?” he whispered. I blinked.

“I—I want to.” I ran my hand down his bare arm, feeling the muscle beneath his warm skin. “Please give me the chance to try.”

He exhaled deeply, as if he’d been holding in a breath for eternity. “I made that mistake once.” He kissed me again, this time with aching gentleness. “I will not make it again.”

Suddenly the weight of his body was gone, and he turned away to put his clothes back on. I lay there, exposed and shivering in the open air, and the tears I’d been holding back all evening finally broke through. “Don’t you love me?”

He flinched, staring at the floor. “I love you, Persephone. More than my own existence. But it is because I love you so much that I cannot do this. In time, if we were to take this slowly, I would be honored. Under these circumstances, when I am nothing but a release to you...” He shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

I opened my mouth to tell him he was so much more than a release, but I couldn’t force the lie out. If anything, he wasn’t even that. He was a way for me to feel loved. A way to get back at Hermes. And I didn’t care if it made things worse, so long as the pain of Hermes’s betrayal disappeared.

But whether I wanted to admit it to myself or not, that wound was far too deep for anything to mask it, even sleeping with Hades. I *hurt* in a way I’d never hurt before, and Hermes had created a gaping hole in my chest that nothing could fill. I curled up in a ball, not caring that I was still naked, and I let out a choked sob. Hades must have been halfway to his desk by then, but instantly he touched my back. It was a comforting gesture, not a romantic one, and it was something I desperately needed.

“You’re all right,” he murmured, and he wrapped a blanket around me. “Everything will be okay.”

He could say that as much as he wanted, but he didn't know. He couldn't. I buried my face in his pillow, making a mess of the deep blue silk, but he didn't seem to mind. Instead he lay down beside me and gathered me up in a gentle embrace. "It will get easier," he murmured. "It may not feel like it now, but it will."

That only made me cry harder. Of course he knew what this was like. I'd done this to him again and again throughout our marriage, and never, not once, had he broken down in front of me. He'd kept that pain bottled up, refusing to take it out on me no matter how much I may have deserved it. Between him and Hermes, there was no contest. Hades would've never been with Aphrodite. He would've never even thought about her that way. He would've been there for me every moment of every day—he *had* been there for me, and I'd just never seen it before.

And now that I did, now that my eyes were open and I finally understood, I couldn't be with him. I'd messed it all up. I'd hurt him too badly for us to ever move beyond it. And that wall of hatred and resentment—it would never disappear. Whatever was causing it, whatever had made me feel that way to begin with, we were long past the point of fixing it. That wall was as much a part of me as Hades's love for me was a part of him. There was no getting around it no matter how hard I tried. If sheer willpower alone could've made it crumble, I would've managed that a long time ago.

Eventually I fell asleep, and during the night, Hades never left my side. When I awoke, his arms were still wrapped around me, and his eyes were open. He'd spent the entire night holding me, knowing we could never be together the way he wanted, knowing I would almost certainly go out and hurt him again as soon as the pain from Hermes's betrayal healed.

No. I wouldn't. Not this time. Hades had already given up too much for me, and no matter how miserable I was, even if it meant an eternity alone, I would never let that wall—I would never let *myself*—hurt him again.

* * *

Centuries passed, and then eons. Every spring equinox, Hermes was there waiting for me when Hades dropped me off, and I walked past him without a word every single time. Eventually we began to exchange glances, and then smiles; after the first thousand years, he finally came to visit me one summer, and we spent the day tending the garden with my mother. Although we began to talk again, it was never as anything more than uneasy friends.

Without Hermes's companionship, my summers weren't much better than my winters anymore. Hades built me several homes scattered across the world, and while I visited each and admired them all, my summers always began and ended at my mother's cottage. But over time, she grew increasingly distant. Some summers she could pretend nothing was wrong, but I still felt the heat of her disappointment when she thought I wasn't paying attention. Every glance, every absent hug and kiss—I felt them all, and they wore me down faster than my winter tomb ever could.

Hades and I never became anything more than we were, though I kept my promise to myself: I didn't cheat on him again. And that faithfulness gave me what small amount of happiness I could find. I'd made mistakes, I'd been a terrible person, but I could at least give Hades my loyalty now. We ruled together, side by side, and we may not have been deliriously happy, but we were content. I grew better at appreciating the small things, finding joy in our routines, and eventually I accepted my fate. This was my life, and the time to change it had long since passed.

All of that shattered the day I saw him.

I was up in the observatory, but instead of watching the afterlives of the dead, I'd let my mind wander to the surface. Though I would've rather died than admit it to anyone, occasionally, when I was at my worst, I watched Aphrodite. While I languished in loneliness, she had lover after lover, a whole host of men who would have died for her—and some who really did. She had everything I wanted, and no matter how I tried to console myself, my hatred for her only grew.

But I never stopped watching her. Sometimes to live vicariously through her; sometimes to convince myself that I had it better. I

didn't, of course, but once in a while I'd stumble across moments that let me fool myself into believing it, if only for a short while.

This wasn't one of those moments. As the last vestiges of sunset stretched across the horizon, Aphrodite splashed in the ocean with the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. He was tall and strong, his face perfectly proportioned and his coloring fair. His smile seemed brighter than the sun, and when he glanced in my direction—unable to see me, of course, but still—my heart pounded, and warmth filled me from head to toe. It was the way Hermes had made me feel so many lifetimes ago. The way I wanted Hades to make me feel.

I was instantly smitten, but I wasn't the only one. As I watched them together, Aphrodite couldn't take her eyes off him, either. Despite their games, she constantly kept a hand on him, as if she were afraid he would disappear. Maybe he would. Maybe he was some sort of illusion. There was no other explanation for how someone so handsome could exist and not be one of us.

He tackled her to the sand and tickled her, and her shrieks of delight made my head ache. So she'd won again. Another boy, this time the most perfect one I'd ever seen, and Hephaestus didn't seem to care. If anything, he'd love her more tomorrow than he did today, because that's the kind of man he was. Just like Hades.

"Adonis!" she cried, laughing. "Adonis, no, I have to get back. I'm already late as it is."

"Take me with you," he murmured, kissing her, and she melted against him. Usually this was my cue to look away or disappear, but something stopped me.

Adonis. That was his name. I whispered it to myself, feeling the syllables roll off my tongue, and I smiled. It was perfect. He was perfect. And I wanted him.

"Mmm, you know I would, but Daddy would kill me," said Aphrodite, stealing another kiss. "I mean it this time—I *really* have to go. I have a council meeting."

I blinked. Adonis knew she was a goddess? Not that men didn't usually suspect when it came to her, but to actually mention the council...

"Very well," he said, releasing her with one last kiss. "I will see you again shortly?"

“Soon,” she promised. “I do have to spend some time with my husband, you know.”

He grinned, and she blew him a kiss. A moment later, she disappeared, and Adonis stared at the spot where she’d last stood. He had a wistful look on his face, as if he were thinking about a future he could never have. And if he were really mortal, then he was right. He couldn’t.

Before I could stop and think, I slipped through the barrier between us, and I arrived on the beach in exactly the spot where Aphrodite had stood. Adonis’s eyes widened, and he blinked several times.

“Who are you?” he said, but he didn’t step back. That was something.

“Persephone,” I said. “I didn’t mean to barge in—”

“Persephone? Queen of the Dead?” he said, and now he did stumble backward. Damn. “Am I dying? Am I to be punished for being with the goddess of love herself?”

I snorted. “Please. If every man she slept with died because of it, there’d be no men left in the world. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m not here to carry you off to the Underworld or anything.” Though he had the good sense to fear it, at least. “I just...”

What was I supposed to say? That I’d been spying on him and Aphrodite? That he was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen? That I saw my future in his smile, that light and warmth and heart—that I wanted a piece of that happiness, no matter how small?

Oh, please. Love at first sight was the sort of thing Aphrodite believed, not me. I should’ve never come.

But the thought of returning to the Underworld and leaving him behind made my shriveled heart twitch in protest. He was a stranger, but at the same time, when I looked at him, I saw the familiar. I saw everything I’d ever wanted in those blue eyes, and I couldn’t tear myself away.

“You just what?” he said, his voice gentler now, as if he could feel whatever drew me toward him, as well. Maybe he could. Maybe this was another one of Aphrodite’s tricks, designed to humiliate me in front of everyone.

I needed to go. Or come up with a better excuse that had nothing to do with the truth. I took a breath, weighing my options. Not much

of a choice. I could no sooner leave him than I could throw myself into the bottomless pit of Tartarus. “You looked—lonely, that’s all. I’m sorry. Please don’t be scared.”

He eyed me, and as the sky turned from rainbow to purple, he relaxed. “It takes loneliness in oneself to recognize it in another.”

“Yes, well. I don’t exactly have a whole host of people in the Underworld begging to come to my parties,” I said wryly.

That got a smile out of him, and it was just as beautiful as the ones he’d given Aphrodite. Maybe even more so, now that this one was meant for me. “I am Adonis,” he said, stepping forward. Though he hesitated, he took my hand and brushed his lips against my knuckles. “I am afraid I do not know the proper protocol for addressing royalty.”

“This isn’t my realm,” I said, “and right now, I’m not the queen of anything. I’m just Persephone.”

That was technically a lie; I still had a month to go before spring, but Adonis didn’t need to know that. “Well, just Persephone, it is the greatest pleasure and honor of my humble existence to set eyes on a creature as beautiful as you.”

I blushed. “Please. I know you’ve seen Aphrodite.”

“And yet I speak the truth.”

No wonder Aphrodite liked him. He could probably talk his way out of the Underworld. “Do you live here?” I said, and he nodded.

“Aphrodite brought me here to keep me safe,” he said. “Though safe from what, I’m afraid I do not know.”

I did. One look at Adonis, and it was obvious Aphrodite was worried someone else would claim him for their own. “What about your home? Your family?”

He shrugged and took my arm as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “I have none.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Adonis shook his head, and his blond curls fell into his eyes. “Don’t be. All the more time to spend with you. Do goddesses eat? Might I interest you in dinner?”

I should’ve said no. Hades would miss me before long, and I’d promised myself I would never betray him again. But Adonis made me feel as if I was flying—one look, one smile, and that was enough

to wash all of the bad away. This was what I'd missed since Hermes. This was what I'd craved. And no matter how much I loved him, Hermes was nothing compared to Adonis.

"Yes," I said. "I think I have time for dinner."

He beamed and brushed his lips against my cheek. The spot where he'd touched me seemed to sear itself into my skin, and as he led me toward the edge of the woods, I hugged his arm. It wouldn't hurt to miss one evening with Hades. I'd make it up to him, stay an extra day after the spring equinox or something. But nothing, not even my soul-crushing guilt, could make me walk away from Adonis.

* * *

Each evening, after Hades and I finished our judgments, I visited Adonis. Sometimes I stayed for a few minutes, sometimes for hours, always timed to make sure Aphrodite would never find us. But she stayed away more and more, always grumbling about Ares or Hephaestus needing her attention. Adonis never complained, and she never asked why.

But I was that reason. The time I spent with Adonis was bliss, and from the way he lit up upon seeing me, I knew it wasn't just me. Together we explored the island hand in hand, and we talked about everything. My life, his, the role the council played in the lives of mortals—Aphrodite had told him far more than we were permitted to tell mortals, and that made the conversation much easier. I wasn't bending any rules she hadn't already broken, and Adonis seemed to enjoy hearing about what we did.

Mortals already told stories about my family—some true, some embellished, some outright ridiculous, and Adonis took great joy in relaying them to me. We made a game of it; he would remove or replace the names, and I would try to guess which member of my family he was talking about. I'd never laughed so hard in my entire existence.

I didn't kiss him though, and while we held hands, he never pressed for more. I couldn't give it to him, not while it was still winter. Not while I was still Hades's. Being here was enough betrayal on its

own. I couldn't make things worse no matter how tempting Adonis was.

I ached for spring to come. We talked about Mother's cottage and how we might get one of our own; Adonis had never had a home before, not a proper one he'd chosen for himself, and he relished the idea of seeing the place that had become my summer retreat. As spring neared, I grew giddy with the thought of showing him my home and sharing my summer with him. He, in turn, was never too embarrassed to tell me exactly how excited he was, as well.

That was the best part about being with him—the honesty. The openness. After millennia of enduring the lies and secrets within my family, even down in the Underworld, it was a relief not to question every word he said. He was everything I'd ever wanted, and even if I could only have him as a friend, that would still be more than I'd ever thought I'd have.

But I did want more. I longed to kiss him, to touch him, to bask in his outer beauty as much as I enjoyed the beauty inside. We were perfect together in every way, and as soon as I could, I would steal him from Aphrodite and give him the life he wanted. The life he deserved. The life we both deserved.

Days before the spring equinox, he and I sat together on the beach, our hands clasped as we laughed over a story he'd told me about his childhood. I was oblivious to our surroundings, barely aware of time passing at all, and it was only the look on Adonis's face that alerted me to the fact that something was wrong.

I turned. Standing in the sand, her arms crossed and a scowl on her pretty little face, was Aphrodite.

Lovely.

"I wasn't aware it was spring already. What are you doing here?" she said in a sickeningly sweet voice.

"Talking to a friend," I said, not bothering to match her tone. Adonis knew exactly how I felt about her. "What are you doing here? Cheating on your dozen boyfriends?"

She scoffed. "Only a dozen? You severely underestimate me. Hi, love," she said to Adonis. "Is Persephone bothering you? I can make her leave, if you'd like."

I bristled. "Make me leave? How? By cooing at me?"

“Don’t you have a husband to get back to?” she snapped.

“Don’t you?”

She sniffed. “He knows exactly where I am, though I’m willing to bet Hades has absolutely no idea where you are. You *do* know who she is, don’t you, Adonis? And who her husband is? He controls your afterlife, you know. Are you really willing to risk that?”

Adonis stared at our intertwined fingers. At least he wasn’t trying to make me let go, but he didn’t say anything, either. I squeezed his hand.

“Adonis and I are friends, nothing more.” The urge to rip her hair out twisted inside me, and it took every ounce of my self-control to stay seated. “Though he will be coming to stay with me on the spring equinox.”

“Is that so?” Aphrodite raised an eyebrow. “And who decided that?”

“Adonis did.”

She huffed. “You have no right to come here and steal him like—”

“Like what? Like you stole Hermes?”

She let out a bitter, empty laugh. “Is that why you’re doing this? Because of Hermes? That was *eons* ago.”

“I’m doing this because Adonis is my friend, and I love him,” I said with as much dignity as I could muster. “It’s his life, and you don’t get a say in it.”

“Adonis, tell her,” demanded Aphrodite, not taking her eyes off me. I glared back. “*Adonis.*”

To my immense satisfaction, Adonis said nothing. I smirked, even though it was petty, and Aphrodite let out a frustrated screech that startled the seagulls.

“Daddy!” she shrieked, and even though the sky was blue and clear, thunder rumbled through the air. Adonis’s eyes widened, and he started to stand, but I gently tugged on his hand.

“It’s fine,” I said quietly. “He won’t hurt you.” I hoped.

Lightning sizzled on the beach, and in the blink of an eye, Zeus arrived. No chance in hell he would’ve come that quickly if I’d been the one to call. Standing an even distance away from us, he frowned and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Dare I even ask?”

Aphrodite was in tears now, and of course she looked beautiful when she cried. I hated her. “Per-Persephone is trying to steal Adonis from me.”

My mouth dropped open. “Excuse me? He *wants* to stay with me, and he has every right to choose his own life.”

“He already chose me long before you showed up, you cow.”

“Cow? You vain little—”

“Enough, girls.” Zeus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Aphrodite, start at the beginning.”

She sniffed and straightened her shoulders, looking down her nose at me. “Adonis and I’ve been together for ages. We love each other, and we’re perfect together, naturally.”

“If you’re so perfect together, then why do you keep him trapped on this island?” I said.

“I’m not trapping him. I’m protecting him.”

“From what? Other girls who might actually be able to devote themselves to him completely?” I snapped.

“Persephone,” said Zeus in a warning tone, and I huffed. This was completely unfair. Not just for me, but for Adonis, too. It was obvious he wasn’t going to speak up in his own defense, though. Not that I blamed him, of course—my father could be intimidating at the best of times, and I was a goddess. I couldn’t imagine what being in his presence was like for a mortal.

“I keep him here to protect him from Ares,” said Aphrodite. “He’s been acting a little jealous lately, and there’s no point in causing a skirmish.”

As if she hadn’t caused a million of those in her existence. I sandwiched Adonis’s hand in both of mine. Screw Zeus’s commands. I wasn’t going to stay quiet, not about this. “So not only are you keeping him here like some kind of pet, but you’re endangering his life, too. What sort of love is that?”

Aphrodite’s face turned red. “How dare you—”

“Silence, both of you,” said Zeus in a voice that rolled like thunder, and even Aphrodite obeyed. “Adonis—that is your name, yes?”

He swallowed and nodded, averting his eyes. His grip would’ve likely broken my bones if I hadn’t been immortal.

“What is it you choose to do, Adonis?”

I exhaled. A choice. At least Adonis would have that much. I patted his hand. "It's all right," I whispered, and across from me, Aphrodite stomped her foot in protest. Too bad.

"I..." He stopped and shook his head, staring at the sand. Why, because he thought Aphrodite would curse him if he didn't choose her?

Probably. And I wouldn't put it past her, either. "It's your life," I whispered. "Remember that."

But he still said nothing. At last Zeus ran out of patience. "Very well, then I will decide. In the absence of the young man's opinion, I will split his time equally between both of you. He will spend one third of the year with Aphrodite, one third of the year with Persephone and for the final third, he will do what he pleases. Is everyone happy?"

No, not in the least, and judging by the pinched look on Aphrodite's face, she wasn't, either. But we both nodded, and Adonis didn't protest. He barely even blinked.

"So be it. Now, if my beloved daughters do not mind, I have matters much more important than this to attend to." Without another word, he disappeared, and instantly Adonis relaxed.

I turned to Aphrodite. I could've said a million things to her, but instead I blurted, "Why wasn't Zeus mad that you told Adonis who you are?"

Aphrodite shrugged, clearly put out over having to share him. "Because I've been lobbying Daddy to let Adonis join us, of course. But now you had to go and ruin it, didn't you?"

I snorted. "And how did I ruin it? You're the one who wouldn't let him make up his own damn mind."

"Persephone." Adonis's voice was hoarse, but at least his grip on my hand wasn't quite so tight anymore. "I apologize to you both for not speaking up. It is just..."

"No need. We both know Daddy's a little intimidating sometimes," said Aphrodite cheerfully, though there was a glint in her eyes as she looked at me. "But now that Daddy's made a decision, we have to figure out who gets what third."

I scowled. No doubt she'd try to make me take the winter months. "I want him starting on the spring equinox. The entire spring and first

month of summer.”

She eyed me, and I steeled myself for the fight I knew was coming. Instead of objecting, however, she nodded. “Yes, I think that’s an excellent idea. I’ll take the next four months, and then Adonis can do whatever he pleases with the final four.”

I blinked. That was it? Not even a hint of protest? “What’s your game, Aphrodite?”

“Game?” she said, her eyes widening innocently. A sure sign she was lying through her teeth. “Is it so terrible to give my sister a chance at happiness?”

There wasn’t much I could say to that, not without looking like a monster in front of Adonis. I would figure it out eventually though, and when I did, I would rip her apart. “Fine. At the start of the spring equinox, you and I will go to my cottage,” I said to Adonis. “And Aphrodite will stay very, very far away.”

She sniffed. “Fine, as long as you promise to never come back here, either. This is my island, not yours.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

We glared at each other. This war wasn’t over, but for now, we had no choice but to call a ceasefire. I would discover her game soon enough, and until then, I wasn’t about to let her or Zeus or anyone ruin my time with Adonis.

* * *

On the morning of the spring equinox, Hades dropped me off in the meadow as he’d done thousands of times before. I leaned in to give him a kiss on the cheek goodbye, nothing more than what it was, but he stiffened.

I frowned and looked behind me. Standing in the clearing, as promised, was Adonis. And Hermes. And Mother.

Terrific.

“And that, I take it, is Adonis?” said Hades quietly, and I blanched.

“Yes.” Who had told him? Aphrodite or Zeus? Did it even matter? “We’re just friends.”

“For now,” he said softly, and I gave him that peck on the cheek.

“I’ll see you on the autumnal equinox. Take care of yourself.”

He remained stoic as I walked across the meadow, and a knot of guilt formed in the pit of my stomach. I should’ve told him, but these seasons were mine, and telling him before anything had happened wouldn’t have made it any easier. It wouldn’t have made him hurt any less.

I ignored Hermes completely. He frowned as I passed, but to my relief, he didn’t say anything. The situation was awkward enough as it was without his getting involved. Instead I headed toward Adonis first, taking his hand and giving him a smile. He returned it, albeit nervously, and he glanced over my shoulder. At Hades, no doubt. “It’s fine,” I said, and I led him toward Mother. “I want you to meet my mother, Demeter. Mother, this is—”

“I know who he is,” said Mother quietly. Instead of welcoming him like I expected, as Adonis bowed in greeting, her lips curled back with contempt. “I thought you were past this, Persephone.”

“Past what?” I said. “Past making friends? Past wanting to be happy?”

“Past causing your husband pain in the most deplorable way possible,” said Mother. Beside me, Adonis straightened, and I touched his elbow. No need for him to waste effort if she was going to be cruel about it.

“You’re the reason that me finding a bit of happiness is so *deplorable* in the first place,” I said. “If you can’t support me, then fine, I don’t need your support. And I don’t need you here, either.”

I didn’t know what I expected—an angry retort, a sneer, Mother to break down and beg my forgiveness. Either way, I didn’t expect her to fold her hands, give Adonis a slight nod and disappear completely.

All the air left my lungs, and I stared at the empty space where she’d stood moments before. She’d gotten mad at me before, of course, and her disappointment over the years had become impossible to bear. But never had she turned her back on me. Not like this.

“I am sorry,” whispered Adonis, his lips brushing against my temple. The regret in his voice only made the ache inside me grow.

“Don’t be. Please.” He shouldn’t have had to suffer for my mistakes. “Let’s just go.”

“All right,” murmured Adonis, leading me down the path I’d traveled thousands of times before. I trailed after him, heartbroken and empty, and not even the warm weight of his hand in mine brought me comfort.

I thought I’d known what loneliness felt like, but it wasn’t until I walked that trail without Mother that I finally understood. Even in my darkest hour, Mother had been there for me. She’d loved and supported me no matter how often or hard we fought. And now—

Now the one person I’d always needed, the one person I’d thought would always be there for me, was gone.

* * *

That summer was simultaneously the best and worst of my life.

The hole Mother had left inside me only grew as it became clear she had no intention of returning. But at the same time, those four months with Adonis filled me in a way nothing ever had before. Every moment was an adventure—I’d explored the forest around the cottage countless times, but somehow every day he managed to find something new, something small but beautiful that I’d overlooked. A wild garden full of exotic flowers that tangled together in chaos. A tree so ancient and gnarled that I suspected it outdated Zeus. He reintroduced me to things I’d long since lost—the warmth of the sun on my skin, the shiver down my spine as I stepped into a cool river. He gave me back pieces of my life I’d never realized I missed.

No one could deny Adonis was gorgeous, but the more I got to know him, the more I realized that his appearance was little more than a taste of his inner beauty. He was kind, generous, honest and, despite the fact that Aphrodite had gotten to him, he was innocent in a way I hadn’t been since my marriage eons ago. He had nothing but love inside him, and he radiated it every waking hour. I drank it in, letting it fill me until all of the negativity washed away, and by the time four months was up, I’d never been more content with my lot in life. All of it, every last terrible moment, was worth it now that I knew it had led me to Adonis.

In the middle of summer, Aphrodite came to claim him. To her credit, she was mostly polite about it, only giving me a small smirk

when Adonis turned his back. But the instant they left, that hole in my heart opened up, hemorrhaging all of the happiness I'd collected during our four months together.

I cried harder than I ever had before. Now that Adonis was no longer there to act as a buffer, for days I did nothing but curl up in bed and stare at the wall as reality set in.

Mother hated me. I'd cheated on Hades again. Hermes was barely talking to me, and the one light in my life was currently with a blonde whore who couldn't possibly love him the way I did. He was just another toy to her, and the thought of him going through that, having no say in his time with Aphrodite the way I'd had no say in my time with Hades—

It wasn't fair, but there was nothing I could do about it, either. Zeus had made up his mind, and if Adonis wasn't willing to speak up on his own behalf, then so be it.

Though I wasn't proud of it, I spied on them. He didn't kiss her the way he kissed me; he didn't watch her the way he watched me. And every time Aphrodite laughed, I swore I saw him flinch.

That should've given me some amount of satisfaction, but it only made me more miserable. Adonis should've had what I didn't—freedom. And instead, in my quest to find happiness, I'd stolen that from him. Did that make me as bad as Hades? As bad as Mother and Zeus?

Eventually summer turned into autumn, and it was time for me to return to the Underworld. Hades greeted me in the meadow as always, but rather than a smile and a kiss on the cheek, he simply nodded coldly and took my hand without a word. Whatever he'd gone through in those six months, whatever thoughts and questions had haunted him, had also ruined every step of progress we'd made in the thousands of years since Hermes and I had broken up. And more than ever, self-loathing snaked through me, doing nothing but compounding my despair. I didn't deserve Hades's friendship. I didn't deserve Adonis, not after doing this to him. I didn't deserve any of it.

Those six months in the Underworld were blank. I went through the motions of existing, but some integral part of who I was had given up entirely. Hades stopped spending the evening with me. He no longer brought me breakfast. He could barely stand to look at me

even when we had to, even when a mortal's eternity depended on our communication. And rather than take steps to fix it, all I could do was drown in the darkness that was my life. Not even the promise of four months with Adonis in the spring made it better.

After several weeks of spying on Adonis and Aphrodite, I stopped, unable to stomach seeing him so upset any longer. But eventually her time with him passed as well, and shortly before the spring equinox, I couldn't resist checking in on Adonis once more.

He stood in a stream I didn't recognize, using a net to capture fish. I watched him, invisible to his eyes, and just seeing him like this—free and happy—was enough to make me smile. Four months wasn't forever, and one day Aphrodite would grow bored of him. I never would though, and eventually, when mortality claimed him, I would have him entirely to myself. Aphrodite wouldn't be able to touch him in the Underworld.

Behind me, someone giggled, and a cold wave of dread crashed through me, washing away what little warmth had blossomed. Even though it was his four months of freedom, even though everything I'd witnessed made it clear he didn't love her, Aphrodite skipped out of the trees, a flower tucked behind her ear.

"Adonis! There you are." She stepped into the stream with him and set a hand on his bare back. "Any luck?"

He shook his head. "A few close calls."

"Well, I'll just ask the nymphs to make us dinner then," she murmured. "I'm *starving*."

Standing on her tiptoes, she kissed him on the mouth, her hand dancing downward toward his waist. She wasn't hungry for food, that was for damn sure.

I was going to kill her.

This was supposed to be Adonis's time alone, not an extra third of a year for her. And why was he going along with this? Why hadn't he refused her and walked away?

The same reason he hadn't spoken up when Zeus had asked him, more than likely. Mortals with any sense of self-preservation didn't question a god. Even one as feeble as Aphrodite.

I didn't hesitate. I pulled my body through the space between us as I'd done almost exactly a year ago, and this time Aphrodite didn't

seem the least bit surprised to see me.

“I was wondering when you’d stick your nose where it doesn’t belong,” she chirped, sliding her arm around Adonis’s torso. He paled at the sight of me, and though he tried to step back from Aphrodite, she held on. Naturally. Couldn’t risk letting her trophy think for himself, else her precious ego might be bruised.

“You don’t have to spend these months with her,” I said to Adonis, keeping my voice as steady as I could. “You know that, don’t you?”

He nodded and averted his eyes, his fishing net all but forgotten. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I said, glaring at Aphrodite. “I’m sure this wasn’t your idea. Why are you here with her?”

“I couldn’t just turn him away in the middle of winter, now, could I?” said Aphrodite, her eyes wide.

“He spends those four months alone. That was our deal,” I said.

She tilted her head and gave me the perfect imitation of a smile. “Oh? I recall Daddy saying he could spend this third doing whatever he wanted. And rather than starving to death, he chose to remain with me.”

That conniving bitch. I raised my hand to slap her, but what was the point when she couldn’t feel pain? “So that’s why you let me have the first four months with him—so you could trick him into spending his free four with you.”

She laughed. “Of course. Honestly, it’s not like he could go to you anyway, so why shouldn’t he spend them with me? He loves me.”

“Not the way he loves me,” I snarled.

“Is that so? Adonis, tell Persephone how much you love me.”

He grimaced, not meeting either of our stares. At last he slipped from Aphrodite’s grip, and taking his net, he splashed toward shore without a word.

Fine. If he wouldn’t defend himself, then I would.

“See? He can’t even answer you,” I said, drawing myself up to my full height. “He loves me without trickery, and if I were here to spend time with him—”

“But you aren’t,” said Aphrodite. “Don’t you see that? Hephaestus knows about my affairs—he knows this is something I need in order to be myself, and he accepted that long before we married. But

Hades didn't. Despite everything you've done to him, he loves you. He's loved you for so long that it's as much a part of him as the Underworld is now. And even though you have his unconditional, endless love, you have no problem turning your back on him and hurting him in the worst ways possible."

I opened my mouth to speak, fury building inside me faster than I could release it, but she kept going. She stood only inches in front of me now, her nose practically touching mine, and it took everything I had not to throttle her.

"You're selfish, Persephone. You're the most selfish person I've ever met. You hurt Demeter. You hurt Hermes. You hurt Hades so badly that he's nothing more than a ghost of who he was before you ripped his heart out and fed it to the dogs. You hurt people again and again, and the worst part about it is that you don't care. You can claim to love Adonis all you want, but he'll never have all of you. And one day, you're going to hurt him the way you've hurt everyone else in your life, and I won't let that happen."

I stared at her, every word I'd planned to fling back in her face dissolving on my tongue. In spite of her many flaws, Aphrodite knew love, and she knew people. She could see the good side and the bad, and she, more than any of us, could weigh them against each other rather than rushing to judgment. And if that's how the most understanding of us saw me—

Maybe it was our battle over Adonis. Maybe it was my constant jealousy. Maybe she just wanted to win. But even so, she still wouldn't say those things if she didn't believe them.

The weight of her words crashed down around me, leaving me shaking and exposed and vulnerable in a way I'd never been before. Was that what the entire council thought of me? Was that how Hades saw me? And Mother—did she believe it, too?

Were they right?

"I—" I swallowed. "I need to go." Stepping back, I mustered what little strength I had left and said, "Cut him loose, Aphrodite. Give him his freedom. If you really love him..." I shook my head, and without giving her the chance to rub salt in my already gaping wound, I disappeared back to the Underworld. Back to Hades.

Back where I belonged.

* * *

I stayed in the observatory for the rest of the night, not bothering to go to my chambers. Hades wouldn't notice, and on the remote chance he did decide to come visit me, I needed to be alone.

I turned Aphrodite's words over in my mind again and again without reprieve. She was right, and I hated myself for it. I hated myself for every bit of it. But at the same time, she didn't understand—she didn't see the whole picture, the life I'd lived and the things I'd missed, things she'd never wanted for. She was loved wherever she went by everyone who set eyes on her. Me—I was the dreaded Queen of the Underworld. I was the person no one wanted to see, and when I did run across the rare mortal on the surface, they all fled. Except Adonis.

To Aphrodite, he was nothing more than an exceptionally beautiful toy, but to me, he was everything I'd never had before. She didn't understand that—how could she, when her world was saturated with love? She would never be alone. She would never face an eternity of loneliness and heartache. But that was my reality, and no matter how good a judge of character she was, it simply wasn't in her capacity to understand that.

By the time morning came, I itched with the need to defend myself. For a few minutes, I debated going up to the surface and giving her a piece of my mind, but it wouldn't do any good right now. I needed her to understand, and in order to make that happen, my argument had to be perfect.

I dragged myself to the throne room at the appointed time, and when Hades trudged down the aisle, I was already seated in my throne. The way he eyed me confirmed he knew I hadn't spent the night in my chambers, and I made a mental note to straighten that out later. He deserved the truth. And an apology.

At last the judgments got under way. They were routine, for the most part—mortals who hadn't believed in the afterlife, or mortals who had believed, but had never anticipated what it might be like. A few children mixed in with the adults as well, and those judgments always hurt the most, seeing their young lives over before they'd begun. Hades and I had agreed long ago that they would always be

granted their happiest memories regardless of whatever hell a handful of them thought they deserved.

The throne room was full that day, and by the time evening came, we'd barely made it through half. Hades and I had other duties as well, of course, but neither of us halted the proceedings. I stole a glance at him, searching for signs of fatigue, but he was as stoic as ever. And I was too keyed up from my fight with Aphrodite to stop, either.

A woman moved to the spot before us where countless other souls had stood. Her hair was long and stringy, and her hands shook as she regarded us with a wavering gaze.

"I know that because of my misdeeds, I am to be banished to an eternity of fire and brimstone to dance with the devil himself," she said, her voice shaking as much as her hands. "But I beg of you—I only acted out of love."

"And what are these acts of which you speak?" said Hades in a low voice. The woman winced.

"I—betrayed my husband. But he wasn't good to me, your majesty. He had little love for me, and after a time, I could no longer love someone who didn't love me back. I cherished my vow to him for as long as I could, but—when I met someone else, someone who loved and appreciated me..."

She broke down, and I glanced at Hades. Was this his idea of a joke? His brow was knitted, however, and he clutched the arms of his black-diamond throne. No way he'd planned this.

Our eyes met, and he quickly looked away. So he was aware of the irony, as well. Not that adulteresses were all that uncommon, but this woman's story tugged at me in a way none of the others before her had. Maybe it was because of Aphrodite, or maybe Adonis—whatever it was, I ached for her.

"This other man," I said, and the woman focused on me, wringing her hands desperately. "He made your life worthwhile?"

"Yes," she whispered. "He made me content. He made me feel as if I were loved."

"Yet you took a vow to remain faithful to your husband," said Hades. "Did you believe your affair to be wrong, despite how it made you feel?"

Her eyes watered. “Y-yes.”

“But what good was her vow when it was choking the life out of her?” I said, turning toward Hades. “What’s more important—a few words in front of family and friends, or her entire life’s happiness?”

“Yes, what *is* more important, Persephone?” he said. “Her virtue or her own selfish desires?”

I clenched my jaw. There was that word again—*selfish*. So that was how he saw me, as well. “How can you call her selfish when all she was trying to do was find some small joy in her life?”

“And how can you not see the pain and humiliation she must have brought upon her husband?”

“Maybe if he’d listened to what she wanted, she would’ve never had to stray.”

“Perhaps if she gave him a chance to prove himself, she would have never felt the need to break her vows to begin with.”

I slammed my hand onto my armrest. “And maybe if she’d had a choice in the first place—”

The doors to the antechamber opened suddenly, and Hades and I both looked up, along with every soul in the throne room. Hermes stood in the doorway, and upon seeing everyone staring at him, he turned pink and hurried down the aisle.

Hades sighed and leaned back in his throne. “What is it, Hermes?”

Hermes glanced at me, his lips pressed together, and he hesitated. “I’m sorry for interrupting—”

“Then get on with it,” said Hades. I glared at him, but he stared straight ahead. Bastard.

Hermes shuffled his feet, his brow furrowed and his eyes glued to the marble floor. All my pent-up anger drained away, and my heart sank. Whatever it was couldn’t be good.

“It’s Adonis,” he said. “He’s dead.”

Part Three

Naturally Aphrodite was responsible.

Not directly, of course, but close enough. Ares, who we all knew was the jealous type, had sicced a wild boar on Adonis the moment Aphrodite had left his side. Why she hadn't seen that coming, I didn't know—more important, why she'd put Adonis in that sort of danger, knowing Ares might try to take revenge...

It didn't matter. Adonis was a citizen of my realm now, and I sat frozen in my throne as Hermes explained what had happened. Hades dismissed the remaining dead, leaving the three of us alone, and the tension was as high as ever between us. I'd searched the faces of the departing souls, but Adonis wasn't among them. No surprise there, really. Only a small percentage of our subjects needed to be judged.

"I'm sorry," said Hermes once he'd finished his horrific story. Adonis had bled to death on the bank of a river, and nausea rolled through me as I imagined his blood mixing with the water. How long had it taken him to die? How badly had it hurt? Had Ares stood there, watching the life drain out of him?

"Do not apologize," said Hades. "For once, this is not your doing. Persephone?"

It was the first time he'd addressed me all winter. I looked up, blinking away my tears. There was no point in crying. I couldn't change the pain Adonis had gone through, and at least now he was safe from Aphrodite's games. "I'm all right," I whispered. "I need to go."

His lips thinned, but even though he must've known exactly where I was going, he nodded. "Very well. Make it quick."

I stood, and without bidding them goodbye, I pushed myself through the space between myself and Adonis's new eternity. In that split second, a barrage of images flashed through my mind—possibilities of his afterlife. The shore where we'd first met. Mother's

cottage. Even his childhood home, which I'd never seen, but he'd told me about in passing. What were Adonis's favorite memories? Which ones would he want to surround himself with for the rest of forever?

I held my breath as my feet landed on solid ground once more. Instead of the green forest I'd expected, however, swirls of white surrounded me, and something soft and cold brushed my cheek. Snow.

My feet were buried in several inches of it, and it fell heavily from the gray sky, thick enough that I couldn't see my hands. This couldn't possibly be right.

"Adonis?" I called. I must've managed to land on the edge of another soul's afterlife. One step in the right direction, and this would melt away, returning me to the familiar. "It's me—where are you?"

A groan cut through the silence, and my heart leaped into my throat. I scrambled through the drifts of snow, unused to moving around in it. We didn't exactly get any at Mother's cottage during the summer.

My foot caught on something, and I flew forward, landing on my hands and knees. With my nose to the ground, I saw a patch of crimson leading to a soft mound only a few feet away. And visible through the snow were several locks of familiar blond hair.

No. Not possible. My body turned to ice, and I forced myself to move toward him. Brushing the snow away, I found the mangled remains of a torso slowly healing itself, and my stomach convulsed.

"Adonis," I whispered, brushing away the rest of the snow to reveal his face. His cheeks were as white as the world around us, and his eyes were dull and his lips blue. He blinked slowly, as if every effort to move was a war, and I gently gathered him up.

"Per-Persephone?" he whispered, hoarse.

"Yes, of course." I brushed a few flakes from his forehead. "Come. We're going to get you out of here."

"No." A drop of strength returned, and gritting his teeth, he tried to move from my grip. But he was too weak and I was too determined to never let him go again. "You—you have to—"

"I have to what? Let you suffer like this?"

"I deserve it." He slumped against me. "Please."

“You don’t deserve this. No one deserves this.”

“I do. For...for hurting you. Aphrodite. Your families.” He took a great shuddering breath, and a river of blood flowed from his healing body. What had done this to him? “I saw the look on Hades’s face—”

A roar ripped through the quiet, and a great white bear appeared through the veil of snow. It bared its teeth, its muzzle stained with red, and its paw lashed out at me. Sharp claws clashed against my skin, but it did no damage. And I wasn’t going to let it hurt Adonis again, either.

“Be gone,” I ordered. “I am your queen, and you will obey me.”

It let out another roar, standing tall on its hind legs. “Please, let me...” whispered Adonis, and I held him closer.

“No,” I said desperately. “You don’t deserve this. It was never your battle, all right? Please—you can make this better for yourself. You can control it.”

The bear struck again, and as its claws caught my face, I screamed. Not in pain, not in fear, but with unadulterated fury. At myself, at Aphrodite, at this damned and miserable place—this couldn’t be Adonis’s eternity. It couldn’t.

With a thought, I dragged him through the space between his section of the Underworld and the palace, leaving the bear behind. A swirl of snow puffed around us as we landed in the throne room, and in my arms, Adonis groaned. His wounds healed instantly, and his color returned far faster than it would have if he were still alive, but his face still pinched in pain.

“Persephone.” Hades stood. “What are you doing?”

“He was torturing himself,” I said, helping Adonis sit up. His expression was blank, and he showed no surprise at suddenly appearing in a palace. Not many souls realized where they were, but Adonis should’ve known.

“So you removed him from his afterlife?”

I wrapped my arms around Adonis. “I had no choice.”

“But it was not your choice to make.”

“A bear was eating him alive in the middle of a blizzard,” I snapped. “I don’t care what his religion or beliefs dictate. What did he ever do to deserve that?”

Hades's expression remained painfully neutral. "Some might say that having an affair with not one, but two married goddesses might very well be enough of a catalyst to make him believe he deserved eternal torture."

"He makes me *happy*." My words were thick, and I clung to Adonis. Hades wouldn't have his way, not this time. "We have to fix this."

"You know the rules. If a mortal does not ask for our guidance, we do not tamper with their afterlife."

"I don't care about your damn rules. I care about Adonis."

"And what of me?" said Hades softly. The pain that had faded during those eons of peace between us flickered across his face, the first hint of emotion I'd seen from him in months. "You are asking me to go against my own laws and condone your affairs."

"I'm asking you to do the right thing. You once told me that all you wanted was for me to be happy. Is that still true?"

Silence, and at last he nodded.

"Adonis makes me happy. He makes me happier than you or Hermes or anyone ever has. Not because he's beautiful, but because we're two halves of the same whole. I found my person, Hades. And I am so sorry—sorrier than I can ever possibly tell you—that it isn't you. But it's Adonis. And I would give up everything to make sure he's all right, even if it meant I could never see him again. It would hurt like hell, but I would do it if it meant getting him out of there." I shifted. "Please. I am begging you—do something."

Hades closed his eyes, his face crumpling. It was the closest I'd ever seen him come to crying. For a long moment he said nothing, and Hermes looked back and forth between us as if deciding whether or not to speak.

"I am sorry," said Hades, his voice nothing but feeble words and anguish. "You know as well as I that there is nothing. The only person who can change his afterlife is Adonis himself."

"Then—then what could make him change it?" I said. "Could we reason with him? Make him see that it's my fault, not his? Could you—forgive him or—"

Hades looked away, the firelight reflecting in his watery eyes. No, he would not forgive him, and my face burned with shame for even

asking. Besides, Adonis wasn't the one he had to forgive. I was.

I buried my face in the crook of Adonis's neck, rocking him back and forth. He couldn't go back there. I would've given anything—my freedom, my love, my entire existence to make sure he didn't, but what did I have that could possibly change his mind?

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you. Please don't do this. Please—isn't there something you want more than to torture yourself?"

He took my hand and brushed his thumb against my palm. Me. He wanted me. Even in the blizzard, he'd called out to me, letting me save him well past the point it should've been possible.

An idea formed in my mind, something so crazy and preposterous that I discarded it immediately. But it cropped up again before I could move on, burrowing itself into my thoughts, refusing to let go.

It was mad. Beyond words. Even as I struggled to find something real, however, it persisted.

I could do it with the council's permission. It would shatter everything, and there would be no going back, but if I did—if Adonis really loved me the way I loved him—it might be crazy enough to work.

"Hermes," I said in as steady a voice as I could muster. "Would you please help Adonis into one of the guest rooms and keep him company? I need to speak with my husband alone."

"Of course," mumbled Hermes, and he helped Adonis to his feet. Adonis stumbled, but he managed to right himself, and at last he let go of my hand. But even as the pair of them walked up the aisle, his touch still lingered on my skin.

Yes. It was mad. It was insane. But I loved him too much not to try.

Once they were gone, I stood and smoothed my dress. "Sit down," I said softly, and though Hades frowned, he obeyed. I took a deep breath. Now or never. "I want to give up my immortality."

His silver eyes widened, and his jaw went lax. Before he could object, I continued.

"The way you feel for me—that's how I feel for Adonis. I love him. He breathed life back into me, and I want nothing more than to spend eternity with him. You would give up your immortality for me. I know you would. And I cannot tell you how much that means to me

—how much *you* mean to me, even if I can't show you the way you want me to. But I want to do the same for Adonis. And I need your help.”

Hades stared at me for the longest minutes of my life. He didn't blink, he didn't breathe, and even his heart stopped beating. The silence grew around us, heavy with everything we both couldn't say, and at last I reached forward to touch his hand.

“This is the greatest gift you could ever give me,” I said softly. “I've spent my existence living a life I never wanted. I couldn't be more grateful for all you've done for me, but we will never be happy together. Not the way I am with Adonis, and not the way you deserve to be. I've done terrible things to you, things I can never make up for, and I've broken more promises than I can count. But if you do this for me, if you support me in front of the council and give me your permission to step down from my throne, I promise I will love you until the sun fades and there is nothing left of me.”

A single tear escaped the corner of his eye, trickling down his cheek and pooling at the corner of his mouth. The shadows in the throne room danced with the torches' flames, and for an eternity, our eyes locked together as he searched for something he would never find.

Hades set his free hand over mine, and at last he whispered, “Very well. If it means your happiness, then you may be free.”

I touched his cheek, brushing away the glistening trail on his skin. “Thank you.”

He nodded once and stood, brushing past me without a word. In his measured gait, he walked up the aisle, and before he could reach the door, he was gone.

* * *

The council convened less than an hour later. Whatever Hades had said to get them all to appear must have been something, but then again, no one had tried to give up their immortality before.

I stood in the center of the Olympic throne room, surrounded by the fourteen members of the council. My own throne was gone. Zeus

rose as Mother, the final member to join us, took her seat, and my heart hammered. She refused to look at me.

“Daughter,” said Zeus, and I inclined my head with as much respect as I could bear to show him. He was the reason I was in this situation to begin with, after all. “Our brother has informed us that you desire to step down from your role as Queen of the Underworld and shed your immortality, all to be with a mortal.”

“Yes,” I said, glancing at Aphrodite. Her eyes were thin as slits, and she gripped the arms of her throne so tightly that her knuckles were white. Good. “While it pains me deeply to think of leaving all of you, I ask for you to allow me to step away in order to die. Adonis, the mortal I love, is trapped in eternal torture in the Underworld, and the only way I can help him is to give him an afterlife he wants more.”

“You are certain this will work?” said Athena.

I shook my head. “I’m afraid it’s impossible to say for sure, but I believe it’s probable enough to take that chance.”

“And what if it doesn’t work out?” said Artemis, leaning back in her throne and giving me a look I knew all too well. It was the same look she’d given Aphrodite every time she went on and on about one of her new *friends*.

I hesitated. What if it didn’t? What if I were doing this for nothing? There would be no going back. Once I was mortal and dead, I would be another one of Hades’s subjects, nothing more. I would be powerless and alone, trapped in the Underworld for eternity—

And how was that any different from my life now?

I squared my shoulders. “I love Adonis. I love him more than my own existence, and I believe he feels the same for me. I understand the consequences if I’m wrong. I understand what I’m giving up regardless, and I’m willing to take that chance.”

“You would leave us?”

Mother’s voice cut through my skin, burrowing into a part of me no one else could touch. Not Adonis, not Hades, no one. I looked at her, and the agony I saw in place of Mother—

A lump formed in my throat. I hadn’t thought it possible for this to hurt anyone more than Hades, but it had never occurred to me that Mother might still care. She’d walked away from me. She’d never

listened when I'd told her how miserable I was, and again and again and again she'd insisted things would get better. They never had though, not the way she wanted them to, and because of that, I was sure I'd lost her.

Maybe I hadn't lost her before, but as I watched her shatter into infinite pieces, I knew I had now.

"If the council grants me my request, I would like nothing more than to see all of you as often as you'd be willing to visit me," I said unsteadily. "I would still be eternal, just in another form, and it wouldn't have to be goodbye unless you wanted it to be."

Mother said nothing to that, and beside Zeus, Hera cleared her throat. "Do you love him more than Hades?" she said in her girlish voice.

I frowned. Did Hera not understand what had happened between me and Hades? Or was she just searching for affirmation? "Hades is my friend. He will always be my friend, but we never fit. We've tried for thousands of miserable years. I can't love him the way he wants me to, and the way I'm forced to linger just out of his reach is torture for him. I don't want to hurt him more than I already have, and the only way I trust myself to do that is to step down and leave him completely."

The council members all turned to look at Hades, who remained stoic as ever in his throne. Hera pressed her lips together, and I could've sworn I saw a hint of a smile. Why? Because someone was finally as miserable as she was?

It didn't matter. She could think whatever she wanted as long as she let me go. "This isn't an easy decision for me, and I'm more terrified than I've ever been in my life," I said. "But Adonis needs this. Whatever I'm feeling is nothing compared to ensuring his eternity. Please—I know this is unprecedented. I know it'll throw everything into chaos for a while. But if you allow this, eventually the wounds will heal. If you do not, they'll fester until Hades and I both shrivel into ash."

"And you are all right with this, brother?" said Zeus.

"I am," said Hades hollowly. "I have seen enough to know that she speaks the truth, and I wish nothing more for her than eternal happiness. I ask the same of you all, as well."

A murmur rippled through the council, and Zeus raised his hand, silencing them. “Very well. We will take a vote. Given the weight of the matter at hand, I ask that we all be unanimous in our decision.” He cast his gaze around the circle, focusing on each of us individually. “Those who agree to grant Persephone’s request?”

I held my breath, and one by one, the members of the council nodded. Hera first, then Ares, then Hephaestus—Artemis, Apollo, Athena, Hestia, Poseidon, Dionysus, even Hermes. Even Hades.

And though her eyes shined with unshed tears, even Mother.

But despite the others’ consent, Aphrodite remained still. Seconds passed in silence, and finally Zeus said, “And you, my daughter?”

“No.” She clenched her jaw so tightly that the cords in her neck stood out. “I won’t agree. She barely knows Adonis—she stole him from me, and she’s betrayed Hades and the council’s wishes repeatedly. I don’t see any reason to reward her for it.”

I opened my mouth to retort, but Zeus raised a hand again, and I fell silent. “Are those your only objections, Aphrodite?”

“Do you really need more? Because I have them.”

In a gentle voice he only used with her, he murmured, “Is it possible you feel this way out of jealousy and grief? He did only die this evening.”

“He did,” she said, her voice shaking. “And the only reason he did is because she insisted I leave him. She couldn’t stand the thought that he might love me more.”

Fury coiled in the pit of my stomach, hot and unyielding. If that was the kind of game she was going to play, then forget silence. “I don’t *care* if he loves you more,” I said. “Don’t you get that? It has nothing to do with you, and it never did. He’s suffering. He’s torturing himself because of what we did to him, and I don’t care if he hates me. I love him too much to let him go through that, and I will do whatever I can to make sure he doesn’t have to, even if it means giving this up. Even if it means spending the rest of my existence alone.”

Aphrodite said nothing, and her entire being seemed to burn with vehemence. Rather than wearing her down, as I’d hoped, my words only seemed to reinforce her hatred. Terrific.

Zeus sighed. “Aphrodite, I will give you one more chance. Yay or nay?”

“Nay,” she said. “And it will be nay no matter how many times you ask or how often she begs. I will not allow her to win.”

I let out a frustrated noise in the back of my throat. Didn't she get it? It wasn't about winning. It was about Adonis and his well-being and making sure he didn't spend eternity in the cold, being eaten alive by a bear. But she didn't care—all Aphrodite could see was the fact that I would be with him and she wouldn't.

I may have been selfish for hurting Hades the way I did, but in that moment, Aphrodite was more selfish than any of us. Because of pride or lust or envy or all three, she would stop Adonis from having the afterlife he deserved, and I hated her. I hated her more than I'd hated anyone, even myself.

Zeus straightened, a flicker of regret passing over his face, and he let out another weary sigh. “So be it. As you have made it clear you are incapable of ruling without bias, I am forced to overturn your vote.”

Both my mouth and Aphrodite's dropped open simultaneously. “*What?*” she screeched. “Daddy, you can't—”

“I can, and as you have given me no choice, I will,” he said. “Persephone, your request is granted. When you return to the surface, you will be mortal. Take a moment to say your goodbyes. Aphrodite, if you would follow me.”

She sputtered in protest, and as he made his way into one of the hallways, she stormed after him. Once she was gone and silence filled the throne room, I looked around at the members of my family, growing dizzy as reality set in.

I was going to be mortal. I was going to die.

And I would never come back here again.

But even as I thought it, I pictured Adonis's face in the snow and the bear that loomed over him. Even if it didn't work and he remained in his frozen hell forever, at least I would have the satisfaction of knowing I'd tried. I would find him no matter how long it took me to scour the Underworld. And even if all I could do was hold his hand as he suffered, then at least I would be there for him for eternity.

One by one, the members of the council said goodbye. My brothers and sisters hugged me, even Ares, and Hestia and Poseidon kissed my cheeks. Hera smiled as she embraced me, and

as her lips brushed against the shell of my ear, she murmured, “You made the right decision. You deserve the future you want, and you would have never been happy with Hades.”

Something about the way she said it sent a shiver down my spine, reinforcing the wall that had stood between Hades and me since our wedding. That war was over now though, and neither Hades nor I had won. But at least we wouldn’t end up like Hera and Zeus.

Finally it was Hermes’s turn. He gave me a small smile that didn’t reach his eyes, and despite everything between us, he trapped me in a giant bear hug. “I’ll miss you,” he said. “Things won’t be the same without you.”

“You’ll know where to find me if you ever get bored,” I said, but even if he did make the trek, he was right—things would never be the same. “Take care. And do yourself a favor and stay away from Aphrodite, would you?”

He snorted, but a cloud passed over his face, as well. I didn’t understand what it meant—then again, maybe I wasn’t supposed to. We all had our demons, and Hermes would have the chance to face his when he was ready.

Once he let me go, I turned toward Mother, who stood stiffly beside her throne. Her eyes were trained on the floor, her hands clasped tightly together, and as I took a step toward her, she backed away. With that one movement, my heart broke completely.

“I hope you are happy,” she said in a strange, almost formal voice. “I will come see you when I can.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, though we both knew that if she did come, it wouldn’t be for a very long time. We’d both made mistakes, and it would take a lot more than this to fix the rift between us. But despite everything that had happened, I ached for the certainty that one day, things would be okay again. No matter how long it took.

Hermes slipped his arm into hers, and as he led her from the throne room, he glanced over his shoulder to give me one more smile. Mother didn’t look back.

I took a deep, shuddering breath. Hades and I were alone now, standing face-to-face, and I had no idea what to say. I should’ve apologized. I should’ve thanked him. I should’ve said a million things, but nothing came out.

“Are you ready?” he said quietly, and I nodded. He took my hand, and as I gazed around Olympus one last time, the sky-blue ceiling and sunset floor faded. This was it, the moment I’d been racing toward ever since Adonis had taken his last breath. But no matter how frightened I was of mortality, of what it would be like to need to breathe, of what it would be like to feel pain and the world around me as a mortal, a sense of calm washed over me, as well. I’d made the right decision. That was all I needed.

When we landed, a sharp pinch jolted through the bottom of my foot, and I opened my eyes. We stood in Mother’s cottage, and the moonlight seemed to light up every corner. I shifted my weight, and underneath my foot I found the source of that jabbing sensation: a pebble.

So this was what it was like to be mortal. I set my hand over my chest, feeling my heart beat, and I drew in each breath with care. Everything felt like it was *more* somehow—smoother, rougher, hotter, colder, all of it. It was as if I’d woken up from a deep sleep, and I was only now aware of the world around me.

“Are you all right?” said Hades, and I nodded.

“It’s just...odd.”

He smiled sadly. “I cannot imagine.”

We stood there side by side for a long moment, and all I did was breathe. In and out, in and out, memorizing the awareness of mortality. How was it possible to feel so alive every day and not burst?

But as much as I enjoyed it, it couldn’t last forever, and I didn’t want it to. I sat down on the edge of the bed and shoved my trembling hands between my knees. “I’m ready. How...?”

“Leave that to me,” he said quietly. “Make yourself comfortable.”

I lay down in the bed, my heart pounding so hard that it actually hurt. “I’m scared,” I whispered, and Hades took my hand. I’d never realized how soft and smooth his skin was.

“Do not be,” he said. “I promise everything will be all right.”

For once, I believed him. “Thank you,” I whispered. “I know I was never very good at showing it, but you’re my best friend. Even when things were rotten, you were always there no matter what I did to you. I’m so sorry for everything.”

“What’s done is done,” he said quietly. “All I have ever wanted was for you to be happy, and if this is the way...”

“It is.” I propped myself up on my elbow. “This is exactly what I want.”

He stared down at our joined hands, his expression forlorn, and he said nothing. He really had been so damn wonderful to me—maybe I hadn’t seen it at the time, but I did now. He deserved so much better than what I’d given him, and in that moment, I wanted nothing more than for him to find it. I was only sorry it’d taken me so long to realize it.

Before I could stop myself, I leaned in and touched my mouth to his. It was a gentle, tender kiss, the kind he’d given me the night we’d nearly slept together a second time. Now I was glad he’d stopped me. Between us, we had enough regrets without inviting more.

Warmth spread through me as I moved my lips against his, and all too soon, he pulled away. For several seconds, neither of us said anything, and my heartbeat resonated in my ears. How was I supposed to say goodbye when I’d spent my life thinking I would never have to?

“I will be there for you whenever you need me,” he whispered. “All you need to do is ask.”

A lump formed in my throat. “Thank you. Come visit me sometime, yeah?”

But even as he nodded, I knew he never would, and asking him was cruel. He deserved the chance to move on. We both did.

“Lie back,” he murmured, and I obeyed. His silver eyes met mine, and as the weight of sleep pressed down upon me, he gave me one final smile. I returned it.

“I love you,” I whispered, and he was silent. At last my eyelids grew heavy, and darkness closed in around me as eternity claimed me as her own. It was painless, peaceful, everything death should have been, and I went quietly. I went gladly.

The last thing I saw was him.

* * *

The sun in my afterlife wasn't as warm or as bright as the real thing, but it was enough to wake me.

I shielded my eyes, squinting at my surroundings. I lay in the bed that I'd died in, but it was daylight now. Somewhere in the distance, birds chirped and a strong breeze rustled the trees, and the flowers hanging from the rafters of Mother's cottage filled the room with the most incredible scent.

So this was what my afterlife would be.

My afterlife. Adonis. I scrambled to my feet and looked around the one-room home, but he wasn't there. My heart sank. He had to be here. After everything that had happened, he deserved peace.

I pushed open the door and stepped into the artificial sun. It wasn't the real thing—beyond the illusion of my afterlife, I was among the dead in the caverns of the Underworld, surrounded by the very rock I'd hated for eternity. The unbearable weight was gone though, along with the wall that had haunted me for eons. Apparently they'd died with my mortal body, leaving my soul free. Finally.

Inhaling deeply, I looked around my afterlife. Flowers bloomed in the garden, a rainbow of colors and as fresh and new as the spring, and the scent of a summer day wafted through the air. It was beautiful, but it couldn't be perfect, not without—

A figure appeared on the path, shaded by the trees, and warmth filled every inch of me. As he stepped into the sunlight, I grinned and launched myself down the path.

Adonis.

He caught me in an embrace, his strong arms lifting me into the air, and he kissed me with the same love and passion and happiness that coursed through my body. Every doubt and regret I'd entertained in those few seconds without him vanished, and in that moment, I saw our eternity.

He was here. We were together.

And at long last, I was home.

* * * * *

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CHAPTER ONE

BIRTH

Henry.

I bolted upright in the darkness. My face was drenched with sweat as my dream faded, but his scream clung to me, imprinting itself in my memory.

Another vision, one of dozens I'd had since leaving the Underworld an eternity ago. This time, however, I wasn't watching Henry go about his life as ruler of the dead as he waited for me to return. I wasn't standing by helplessly as Ava gave Henry false updates about where in Africa we were supposedly searching for Rhea.

Finally Henry knew what had really happened, and in the minutes before dawn broke through the night, I clung to the hope that it wasn't too late.

"A nightmare, my dear?"

A shiver ran through me, and the candles scattered throughout my prison lit up. Cronus sat beside my bed, in the same chair he'd occupied every night since late December, when I'd woken up with a pounding headache and memories I wished were nightmares.

This wasn't a nightmare though. Cronus was here, working side by side with the Queen of the Gods, who would stop at nothing to hurt me as much as she possibly could.

The baby stirred inside of me, undoubtedly unhappy about its rude awakening. I didn't dare speculate over whether it was a boy or a girl. If Calliope had her way, I might never know, and that headache was already more than I could take. I set a hand on my swollen belly, so big that the simplest movements were difficult now, and mentally tried to soothe it. "You didn't hear that?" I said hoarsely.

“My son? Of course,” said Cronus, reaching for my stomach. I slapped his hand away, and he chuckled. “It seems the games are about to begin.”

“What games?” I knew the answer before I’d asked the question though. My dream, my vision—it was the autumnal equinox, and finally Henry knew I was missing.

A sharp pain shot from my back to my abdomen, and I gasped. Cronus was at my side in an instant, exactly the way Henry would’ve been if he were here. I turned away.

“Calliope has decided it will happen today instead,” he murmured, and his voice would have been comforting if it hadn’t come from him.

“Decided what would happen today?” I struggled to stand and make it to the bathroom, but my legs gave out. Cronus’s cool hands were there to steady me, but as soon as I was back on the bed, I jerked away from him.

“That your child would be born.”

All the air left my lungs, and this time it had nothing to do with physical pain. He was bluffing. They were trying to scare me into labor before Henry found out and rescued me, or—or something. Anything other than the truth.

But as I leaned back, my hand found a wet spot on the mattress, and my damp nightgown clung to the back of my thighs. My water had broken sometime in the night. It was really happening.

Nine months of waiting. Nine months of fear. Nine months of time being the only thing standing between Calliope and the baby I was carrying, and now it was over.

I wasn’t ready to be a mother. Never in a million years had I imagined having kids before I turned thirty, let alone twenty. But Calliope hadn’t given me a choice, and with each day that passed, the sick dread inside of me grew thicker until it nearly choked me. Calliope would take the baby from me, and there was nothing I could do about it. In a matter of hours, I would lose my child—Henry’s child—to someone who wanted nothing more than to see me suffer.

But now he knew. Now there was a chance, if only I could hold on a little longer until Henry came.

Cronus must have seen the look on my face, because he chuckled and fluffed a pillow for me. “Do not worry, my dear. Calliope

cannot kill you unless I allow her, and I assure you I would never hurt you.”

It wasn't me I was worried about though. “You're not going to hurt me, but you're going to let Calliope do it,” I snarled. “You're going to let her take the baby the moment it's born, and I'm never going to see it again.”

Cronus stared at me blankly. These were the moments I remembered that in spite of his human form, he was anything but. He didn't understand why I loved the baby so much. Or, when I'd given Calliope too much attitude and she'd hit me in the mouth, why I'd instinctively covered my belly. He didn't get how badly the thought of being separated from the baby hurt me before I'd even met him or her.

Then again, Cronus was also the monster who'd tried to destroy his own children, so I suspected empathy was a little too much to hope for.

“If you would like to keep the child, all you need to do is say the word,” he said, as if it were that simple. Maybe to him it was. “I will ensure that Calliope does not get in the way. In return, all I ask is that you rule by my side.”

It wasn't the first time he'd made that offer, and it wasn't the first time that, for a single moment, I entertained the possibility. As the baby's birth loomed, saying no grew more and more difficult.

Cronus had made no secret of the fact that he wanted me as his queen while he ruled over the entire world, destroying everyone who dared to get in his way. I had no idea why—the small bit of compassion I'd showed him in the Underworld, maybe, or because I hadn't fought him in the first war—but it didn't matter. I would be safe from the destruction, and so would the baby. Henry, however, would be the first person Cronus ripped apart, and the entire world would follow.

As much as I loved this baby, as much as I would have done anything to keep it safe, I couldn't stand by Cronus's side as he wiped out humanity. I couldn't do nothing as he killed every last person I loved, and if I agreed, he would keep me alive until the end of all things. I wouldn't have the choice to die like Persephone had,

and I couldn't live with that guilt no matter how happy and safe my baby was.

But time was running out. The game had changed now that the council knew I was gone, and if I could keep Cronus guessing long enough not to hurt anyone, then maybe that would give the council a chance to find Rhea. So I lied.

"Promise not to kill anyone and I'll think about it."

He grinned, showing off a full set of pearly teeth. Cronus had the smile of an airbrushed movie star, and it only made him more unnerving. "Is that so? Very well. Agree and I will leave humanity alone. My qualms are not with them, and one must have subjects when one rules."

"I said *anyone*," I countered. "Not just humanity. You can't kill the council either."

Cronus eyed me, as if he were weighing the pros and the cons. I held my breath, hoping against hope that I was worth this to him. I had to buy the council more time. "Surely you understand why my children must be contained, but I would be willing to...consider it, depending on the nature of our relationship. On how much you are willing to give." He ran his fingers through my hair, and I suppressed a shudder. "You and me, together for all eternity. Imagine, my dear, the beauty we would create. And of course your child will know your love, and you will never have to say goodbye."

I closed my eyes and pictured the moment I finally got to hold him or her. The baby would have dark hair, I was sure of it, and light eyes like me and Henry—pink cheeks, ten fingers, ten toes, and I would love it instantly. I already did.

"You would be a mother," he murmured, his voice like a siren's call. I hated myself for wanting to follow it down its twisted path. "Forever there to love it, to nurture it, to raise it in your image. And I would be a father."

The spell he had over me shattered, and my eyes flew open. "You are *not* this baby's father," I said as another wave of pain washed over me. This was too fast. Contractions were supposed to come on slow and last for hours—my mother had been in labor for over a day when I was born.

Cronus leaned in until his lips were an inch from mine. I wrinkled my nose even though his breath smelled like a cool autumn breeze. “No, I am not. I am so much more.”

The door burst open, and Calliope stormed inside. She had aged progressively over the past nine months until the angles on her face had become sharper, and she’d grown several inches to tower over me. As Cronus looked like Henry, with his long dark hair and gray eyes that crackled with lightning and fog, Calliope now looked like my mother. Like an older version of me. And I hated her even more for it.

“What’s going on?” she said, and I managed a faint smirk. Apparently she’d overheard something she didn’t like.

“Nothing for you to worry yourself about,” said Cronus as he straightened, though his eyes didn’t leave mine.

“Cronus was making me an interesting offer,” I said, sounding braver than I felt. “Turns out he isn’t going to feed me to the fishes like you want.”

Her lips twisted into a snarl, but before she could say a word, Ava hurried past her carrying a large basket full of blankets, linens and other things I couldn’t make out in the candlelight. “I’m sorry,” she said, her face flushed.

“It’s about time,” snapped Calliope, and she focused on me again. “I’d be careful if I were you, Kate. I’ve got a new toy, and I’ve been itching to try it out on you.”

“What new toy?” I said through gritted teeth.

Calliope glided to the side of my bed, and her eyes narrowed. “Haven’t I told you? Nicholas generously donated his time and expertise to forge a weapon that will let me kill a god. His timing couldn’t be better.”

My blood ran cold. Nicholas, Ava’s husband, had been kidnapped on the winter solstice during battle. Up until now, no one had said a word to me about him.

“That’s impossible,” I blurted. Nothing but Cronus could kill an immortal.

“Is it?” said Calliope with a wicked smile. “Are you willing to bet your sweet little darling’s life on that?”

My baby. She was going to kill my baby. “Ava?” I said, my tongue heavy in my mouth. “Tell me she’s lying.”

Biting her lip, Ava set her basket down on the foot of my bed. “I’m sorry.”

The room spun around me. This was just another game. Calliope was trying to scare me by using the people I loved most against me, and this time my supposed best friend was playing along.

What if it wasn’t a game though? Calliope had sworn she would take away the thing I loved the most, and at the time I thought she’d meant Henry and the rest of my family. But she’d meant the baby. She was about to get everything she wanted from me—there was no reason for her to lie. And the way Ava couldn’t so much as look at me...

My throat swelled until I could barely breathe. “Get out.”

Ava blinked. “But someone needs to be with you—”

“I’d rather have Calliope stay here for this than you, you traitorous bitch,” I spat, forcing the words out. “Get *out*.”

Her eyes watered, and to my satisfaction, she fled, leaving me alone with Cronus and Calliope. Ava deserved this. She’d known what this would mean, that Calliope had every intention of slaughtering my baby. And if Calliope really had forced Nicholas to forge a weapon—if Ava had distracted the council for the past nine months to give him enough time—

I didn’t care how much danger Nicholas was in. He was Calliope’s son, and no matter how terrible a person she was, I couldn’t imagine her killing her own child. But she was going to kill my baby without a second thought, and Ava had known this was her plan the entire time.

Even if our positions had been reversed, even if Henry was the one who was being held hostage, I would have never, ever done this to Ava. I would have never betrayed her and allowed Calliope to kill her child.

“That wasn’t very nice,” said Calliope in a singsong voice, and my stomach churned. She couldn’t kill the baby. I wouldn’t let her.

“I need to pee,” I said, pushing myself up.

Calliope made a vague gesture and busied herself with unpacking the basket. Cronus offered me his hand, but I brushed it

off.

“I think I can make it to the bathroom on my own, thanks,” I said.

Crossing the room hadn't been easy since August, and my body strained with each step I took, but I made it. My prison wasn't exactly plush, although it wasn't a concrete cell with a thin mattress and grungy toilet either. It was a simple bedroom with a bathroom attached, and it was several stories up, making a window escape impossible. I might've been immortal, but I didn't have a clue whether or not the baby was. And if Calliope really did have a weapon that could kill a god, it didn't matter anyway.

I'd tried to get away several times when I'd still been mobile enough to have a chance, but between Cronus, Calliope and Ava, someone had always been there to stop me. I'd made it as far as the beach once, but I couldn't swim and they knew it. The council may have intended this island to be Cronus's prison, but it was mine now too.

Closing the door behind me, I eased down onto the edge of the bathtub and cradled my head in my hands. Frustration rose up inside of me, threatening to spill out in a great sob, but I swallowed it. I needed a moment, and crying would only make Calliope come in after me.

“Henry.” I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to picture him.

“Please. Help us.”

At last I sank into my vision. After nearly a year in this hellhole, I'd learned how to control them, but I still struggled to make it far enough to see him. Golden walls formed around me, along with a long pane of windows much like the room in Henry's palace. But instead of black rock, I saw endless blue sky through the glass, and sunlight poured in, illuminating everything.

“You did this.” The sound of Henry's voice caught my attention, and I turned. He had Walter by the lapels, and his midnight eyes burned with anger and power I'd never seen before.

“It had to be done,” said Walter unsteadily. Even he looked afraid. “We need you, brother, and if this is what it takes to get you to see that—”

Henry threw Walter against the wall so hard that it fractured, leaving a web of broken cracks behind. “I will see you pay for this if it

is the last thing I do,” growled Henry.

“Enough.” My mother’s voice rang out, and both brothers’ heads turned to face her. She looked pale, and she folded her hands in front of her the way she did when she was trying to keep herself under control. “We will rescue Kate. There is still time, and the more we waste—”

“We cannot risk our efforts for the life of one,” said Walter.

“Then I will,” snarled Henry.

Walter shook his head. “It’s far too dangerous for you to go alone.”

“He won’t be alone,” said my mother. “And if you value your hold over the council—”

The muscles in my back and belly contracted, the pain pulling me from my vision and back into the bathroom. I let out a soft sob. My mother was right—we were out of time. The baby was coming no matter how hard I tried to wait, and we were completely alone. Calliope would kill it, leaving me with nothing else that mattered anymore, and there was no one here to stop her. Whether or not anyone came, there was no way out of this. Even if Henry and my mother did attack the island, there was no guarantee they would break through Cronus’s defenses, and by then it would be too late anyway.

The baby nudged me from the inside, and I forced myself to pull it together. I had to do this. I couldn’t break down. The baby’s life depended on it.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, gently pressing against the spot where it had kicked me. “I love you, okay? I’m not going to stop fighting until you’re safe, I promise.”

Someone rapped on the door, and I jumped. “If you think you’re going to give birth in the bathtub, you have another think coming,” said Calliope. “You’re not having that baby until I say you are.”

So she was doing this on purpose after all, which meant she wouldn’t give me much time alone. “Just a minute,” I said, and I stood long enough to turn on the faucet and drown out my whispers in case she was eavesdropping. It wouldn’t do much good, but the illusion of privacy would have to be enough for now.

Easing back down onto the edge of the bathtub, I rubbed my belly. “Your dad’s really great, and you’ll get to see him soon, okay? He’s not going to let Calliope do this to you either, and he’s way more powerful than me. The whole family is. Today is probably going to be scary, and it’ll hurt—well, it’ll hurt me, I won’t let them hurt you—but in the end, it’ll be okay. I promise.”

It wasn’t a hollow promise. Even if I had to die in the process, Calliope would not touch my baby. No matter what it took, I would make sure of it.

* * *

The labor progressed so quickly that I barely made it out of the bathroom. Calliope gave me nothing to help, no medication or words of encouragement, and though Cronus remained by my side, he said nothing as my contractions grew closer and closer together. They had to know the others were coming. There was no other reason to force the baby out like this, and I couldn’t imagine Calliope giving up the chance to make me hurt as long as possible, not unless it was dire.

I refused to scream. Even in the final moments of labor, as the baby ripped through my body, I clenched my jaw and pushed through the pain. Since I’d become immortal, the only thing that had hurt me was Cronus, and apparently giving birth was another exception. My body was doing this to itself, and immortality wasn’t going to stop it.

The moment the baby left me, I felt as if my heart had been ripped from my chest and now rested in Calliope’s arms. She straightened, and a lump formed in my throat as I saw the wrinkled, bloody little child she cradled. “It’s a boy,” she said, and she smiled. “Perfect.”

Somehow, despite the words I’d whispered to him, the hours I spent feeling him kick, the months I’d spent carrying him, he had never felt completely real. But now—

That was my son.

That was my *son*, and Calliope was going to kill him.

She didn't need any tools to cut the cord or finish the rest of the messy birth; in the blink of an eye, everything was clean, and the baby was wrapped in a white blanket. As if she'd done it a thousand times before, she embraced him and stood, leaving me alone on the bed.

"Wait," I said in a choked voice. I was exhausted and drenched in sweat, and despite the pain, I struggled to get up. "You can't—please, I'll do anything, just don't hurt my son."

His wails, so tiny and helpless, filled the room, and my heart crumbled. Every bone in my body demanded that I stand, that I go to him and save him from the life that awaited him with Calliope, but I couldn't move. The harder I struggled, the more I froze, and the more my body ached.

She looked at me, her eyes bright and full of malice. She was enjoying this. She was reveling in my pain. "That's not for you to decide, dear Kate."

On the edge of my vision, I saw Cronus shift. "You will not hurt the child," he said, his voice low and full of thunder. "That is not a request."

For a moment, Calliope's eyes narrowed, and my heart leaped into my throat. She was going to challenge him. Use my son to prove her dominance—that she was the one in control.

But she wasn't, and she knew it. And for the first time since I'd heard of the King of the Titans, I was grateful for him.

"Fine," she said in an annoyed voice, as if she were only letting him win because she wanted to. We both knew the truth. "I won't kill him."

Relief swept through me like a drug, pushing away the agony of dreading his death, and I released the breath I'd been holding. Because of Cronus, he would live. "Can I—can I hold my son? Please?"

"Your son?" Her arms tightened around the baby, and a mockery of a smile curled across her lips. "You must be mistaken. The only child in this room belongs to me."

Without another word, she walked through the door in a cloud of victory, leaving me empty and utterly alone.

She wouldn't take his life—that meant there was still time. But how long would it take before she got tired of obeying Cronus and killed the baby just to watch me bleed?

I had to get to him. I had to save him. Even if Calliope didn't touch a hair on his head, the thought of him being raised by that monster, twisted into something black and beyond recognition as the innocent child he was now—if my time in the Underworld had taught me anything, that kind of life was infinitely worse than the peace of death.

Desperation clawed at me, tearing me up from the inside out, and I slowly turned to face Cronus.

His queen. My life, my choices, my freedom for my son's.

"Please," I said, hiccupping. "I'll do anything."

He brushed his cold fingers against my tearstained cheek, and this time I didn't move away. "Anything?"

The words were like knives on my tongue, but I said them anyway. "Anything," I whispered. "Save him and—and I'm yours."

Cronus leaned toward me, stopping when his lips were only inches from mine. "As you wish, my queen."

I swallowed. Fire spread through my body, leaving burning heat in place of the aches of giving birth as Cronus healed me. It was worth it. Henry would understand, and somehow, someday, I would find a way to unite him with the baby.

I sat up, dizzy with hope, and touched my flat stomach. Somehow Cronus had returned my body to the way it had been before I'd become pregnant, and the missing swell of my belly and chest was disorienting. Why not leave me with the ability to feed the baby? Because he knew it wouldn't matter? But before I could say a word, the world began to shake.

"What—" I started to say, gripping the edge of the mattress, but something in the corner caught my attention. The sky through my window was bathed in an unnatural golden light, and around us the entire island quaked violently.

"I will return, my dear, and then we shall be together," said Cronus. He pressed his cold lips to my cheek, and in an instant he was gone, but I didn't care.

In the distance a black cloud approached, sizzling with lightning. Though Cronus himself couldn't escape the island, it passed through the barrier the council had created as if it were nothing, and I spotted the silhouette of a man on top of it. Hope swelled within me, and I didn't have to see his face to know who the dark figure was.
Henry.

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